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A BORN COQUETTE.

A

BORN COQUETTE

BY

MRS. HUNGERFORD

AUTHOR OF

'MOLLY BAWN,' 'PHYLLIS,' 'LADY BRANKSMERE,' 'THE DUCHESS,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

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A BORN COQUETTE.

CHAPTER I.

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*'Not a better man was found
By the crier on his round
Through the town.'*

* * * * *

'I'm done wid ye! I'm done wid ye! I wash me hands of ye!' says Mr. Murphy, shaking those withered appendages wildly in the air in mingled wrath and grief. That *he* is the ancient butler, and they the junior members of the family in which he has served for years untold, does not in the least detract from the dignity of this denunciation.

'But, Murphy,' begins William with a sort of muffled roar.

'Hould yer tongue, sir ! I declare, Masther William, I wondher ye aren't dead wid the shame. To go poachin' ! poachin' ! mind ye ! in the middle of July ; an' to be *found out* ! Oh ! musha, but 'tis I'm the miserable man this day.'

'But, Murphy !' begins William again, the roar now a resounding one, and the fresh young face crimson with mortification, as he notes the condemnatory glances of the brothers and sisters round him. 'I *wasn't* poaching, I was only——'

'Tell that to the marines,' says Mr. Murphy with great scorn—'tell it to *the Colonel* ! He'll prosecute ye, as sure as fate. Oh, the devil a lie in it ! He'll be down upon ye wid a paper that'll put ye in prison before ye've time to turn in yer bed this night.'

At this Henjy, the smallest child, gives way to loud lamentations, and, flinging himself bodily upon William, encircles him with arms and legs. It is, indeed, marvellous the manner in which he succeeds in twisting these latter portions of his body. Truly it would be a bold policeman who could carry off William to a noisome cell, with those tender fetters to protect him.

'I'm telling you,' cries William furiously, addressing Murphy, but speaking rather more furiously, perhaps, because of certain pinchings from Henjy's eager little fingers, 'that it was by the purest accident I knocked down that partridge. I was jumping over a fence, and—'

'Tis fifty year I've been in this house,' says Mr. Murphy, with a noble disregard of the fact that anyone is speaking except himself. 'Fifty year come last March, I've had the rarin' an' the bringin' up of ye all; an' mighty little do I see to me credit.' Here he shakes his head, as though he would shake the dust out of it against them. "'Tis biddin' ye good-bye I'll be the day, I'm thinkin'.'

This threat is so appalling, so ever so much worse than the suggestion that a prison will be the probable end of William, that a very chorus of sobs arises from the youthful Delaneys. A dismal howling irritates the air. It irritates Gladys likewise.

'Oh, *hush!*' cries she, with all the vigour of sixteen, stamping her foot upon the ground. 'Let us hear the truth; really and truly, William, I do think, considering you knew Colonel Hume was expected home

at any moment, that you *might* have kept out of his woods.'

'Oh, of course, there you go ! You are all down upon me like a hundred of bricks,' cries the wronged William, with indignant emphasis. 'And not one of you know anything about it. And I can tell you *this*, Murphy, that I won't stand any more of your—'

'There's the masther upstairs like a rantin', ragin' lion, and yer sisther, the crathure, smothered in tears !' begins Mr. Murphy all over again, as if driven to it by this touch of insubordination. 'Oh, murther ! why is it ye do these things at all, at all ? An' all for the sake of a bird ! Bad cess to them feathery fools, say I, that can't keep out of anyone's way ; there's nayther luck nor grace in them.'

'Why, what have the partridges done ?' asks Gladys, taking this time the side of the accused. 'It seems rather unfair to put it all down upon *them*.'

'They'll put Masther William in quod. That's *me* opinion,' says Mr. Murphy, in a sepulchral tone.

'What's the matter, what's happened now ?' asks a charming voice. It belongs to a charming body ;

Miss Delaney number two, coming quickly into the room, looks inquiringly at Murphy.

'An' haven't ye heard, miss?' says that veteran, directing all his attention to her. 'Sure here's Masther William has been up in the wood beyant; but spake for yerself, sir.'

'I would, if you'd let me,' cries William, with great wrath. 'Look here, Pen: I went up to Hume Woods this morning, and just as I was jumping over a wall a partridge started up beneath my feet, and I had a stick in my hand, and—er—I don't know how it happened, but, all in a moment like, the partridge was lying there dead. And just as I was picking it up—only to look at it, you know—a fellow came over the wall near me, calling out and yelling like mad, so I—er—I took to my heels and ran home, and—'

'Where's the partridge?' asks Penelope smartly.

'I left it there. I didn't know; I assure you I—'

'Oh, fool!' cries she; 'it would have been just the thing for Nan's luncheon!'

The demoralization betrayed in this speech is evidently too much for Murphy. With a reproach-

ful glance at Miss Penelope, he turns to leave the room.

'Where are you going, Murphy? Wait a second,' cries Penelope; 'what a hurry you're in! Does father know?'

'Arrah, what a question now! Is there anything he *doesn't* know, in spite of his maunderin' over those books of his? Sure I'm tellin' them he's like a tearin' bear. Yes, yellow in the jaws wid anger. An' I wondher at ye, Miss Penelope, encouragin' of Masther William, when ye know what sort the ould Colonel is, and that he's as likely as not to make the deuce's own fuss over that bird.'

'Does Miss Nan know?' asks Penelope quickly.

'Ay, faith; that imp in the kitchen tould her. An' she's frettin' herself to fiddle-strings over it.'

'Oh, that's too bad! And she looked so well this morning; just like her old self. Murphy, go up and tell her it doesn't matter. She will really mind you.'

'She will, the crathure,' says Mr. Murphy complacently, accepting this tribute to his charms with a modest grace. 'I'll go to her, I'm thinkin', an' talk it over.'

‘And don’t forget to mention the prison and the policeman ; *that’ll* cheer her up,’ cries William wrathfully, launching this shaft as the old man reaches the door.

Mr. Murphy turns a withering glance on him, but scorns to speak. Not so those left behind. As Murphy disappears, they all turn and pour forth a very flood of eloquence upon the luckless William.

CHAPTER II.

'The world is a picture both gloomy and bright,
And grief is the shadow, and pleasure the light,
And neither should smother the general tone ;
For where were the other if either were gone ?'

ALL ! There are indeed a great many of them. Considerably too many for the slender income that is left to the present Delaneys out of the goodly heritage of their forefathers. The old blood might show itself, and did, in the charming faces of the girls, the delightful *bonhomie* of the boys that claimed all men as friends ; but there was very little to clothe the good blood or throw out the beauty of the girls.

But if they were poor, they were pleasant, as Bartle, the eldest boy, would have said, and certainly they are the pleasantest, the happiest-going lot, in all that country-side.

From Nan (the head of the family, now the poor mother is dead), pretty Nan, who is nineteen, down to little Henry, aged five—better known in the family circle as Henky—there is not one of them but has in her or him ‘a merry note.’

Living in this old barrack of a place called Rathmore, with its spacious halls and high vaulted chambers, badly or only half furnished, they cling together like the last leaves on a dying oak, and in spite of overwhelming difficulties still contrive to hold their handsome heads high, and to be ‘a power in the land,’ if only for their name’s sake. That good old name!

That money is scarce with them is so very evident that people have forgotten to comment upon it. And as for the girls, they always, one way or another, manage to look irreproachable. In their cotton frocks—their washing flannels—their innocence of all such luxuries as silks and satins and laces, that help so many to an admirable settlement, they still contrive to conquer life and make it bearable. With their delicate heads and dainty air, and slender figures, and pretty, white adorable hands, they show—as old

Murphy puts it—‘ the good dhrop ’—all through, and are unmistakably all that they should be.

Perhaps it is a pity that there are quite so many of them—so many mouths to feed, so many lovely bodies to be clothed ; this thought might undoubtedly suggest itself to an outsider, looking on the ruin of a good old estate and with a plan for its renovation, but to them, *never*. Just two or three less would have made the others so very much easier in many little ways, but those two or three—— Who would be willing to give them up—to sacrifice them for the public good ?

First comes Nan, and then Penelope, and after that Bartle, and then pretty, tall, awkward Gladys, who is hardly old enough to make one sure whether she will be only an ordinary Delaney (which wouldn’t be so bad) or one of the extraordinarily beautiful ones. Then comes William, aged thirteen, and after him, with quite a long lapse for the Delaneys, Nolly (Norah), who is eight, and little Henjy. Enough in all to make any honestly poor man dream incontinently of a general suicide that should put an end to those complexities so certain to occur.

But Mr. Delaney is one of those people who, as it

happens (more often, perhaps, than one likes to think) cares little for the future. It is, indeed, so extremely narrowed a time for him now that perhaps he may be excused for not thinking about it at all; but however it may be, Delaney, as a father, hardly shines. His children's prospects affect him so vaguely that really the matter need scarcely be mentioned; given two rooms to which no one has ingress—his books, his pens, his paper—he declines to trouble himself about such trivial matters as children, servants, household arrangement and bills. These to him are the smaller, the impossible things of life.

The death of his wife, on the birth of Henjy, was perhaps more or less an unacknowledged relief to him. He certainly betrayed no positive grief on her demise—only a decorous calm, that impressed many, and did quite as well as the usual thing, even better, being of a higher class, as it were, and charmingly reserved: and even afterwards, when the world's eyes were off him, he so far decently conducted himself as to show only a subdued joy in the fact that his solitude should now for the future be unbroken.

Of all the girls, Penelope is certainly the loveliest.

Where beauty runs riot and to spare, this is much to say ; and yet, in justice, I must confess that there are two or three unsatisfied ones who deny her right to supremacy in this important matter. Yet to impeach the charms of Penelope is to own one's self a dullard.

The peach-bloom of her complexion ; the exquisite, tender, appealing expression in her eye of Irish blue ; her soft, sweet mouth, that is yet not without determination—not without a suspicion of the Delaney temper ; her pretty, long slender neck, on which her charming head sits so haughtily—that head crowned with hair that, like Rossetti's ‘Blessed Damozel's,’ is ‘yellow like ripe corn,’ *all* make her as lovely and lovable a creature as one might wish to see.

As for Gladys, as I have said, she is still in that nondescript state when one would hesitate whether those undecided features might or might not prove perfection possible. Bartle, who is a year older than her, is as good-looking a youth at seventeen as any sister desirous of escort at ball or party could reasonably demand ; William V., as they call him, is distinctly ugly, though ‘in a rather distinguished way,’ says his aunt, Mrs. Manly, who lives about two miles

away from them. As for little Nolly and Henjy —why, who can describe a child? is it not all written in the book of—

Descriptions are tiresome. Who reads them, I wonder? For my own part, I always skip them. Blue or black eyes, yellow or brown hair, a nose *retroussée* or a Grecian nose—all convey nothing. I can imagine a face easily enough for the heroine, and another for the hero; the house, the grounds, the cosy nook where the final loving scene is laid, the ghastly, dimly-lit room where the murder is accomplished, the station where the runaways meet, the sylvan groves, the flowery gardens, the earwiggy bowers where the unhappy lovers pour out their griefs in dulcet tones one to another, all are plain; why, then, waste time over descriptions of them?

Still, a word for Murphy. Dear old man! The fortunes of the Delaneys, it may well be said, are his, for so long has he followed them from better to worse through a course of fifty years.

On the marriage of his present master to the gentle, loving creature who, in a luckless moment, had consented to link her fate with his, Murphy had gone

over straightway and enlisted himself under her banner. No length of service in the Delaney family could prevent his seeing where justice lay, and giving his allegiance to the weaker side. Her kindly smile, her delicate ways, her nervous glance—the fact, so evident, that she was forlorn in many ways—all contributed to make Murphy her slave.

He had been as devoted to her as though she had been his own kith and kin; and when the babies began to come (and there were so *many* of them), with all the natural love of children ingrained in the character of the Irish peasant, he had accepted them too, one by one, and given to each unit a corner of his bachelor heart. Each and every one was his own special charge. He had, as it were, amalgamated himself with the family, given himself up to it body and mind, so much so that the poor woman, when dying, and not altogether reluctant to leave a land where she had known more sorrow than joy, called for him, and into the humble butler's hands, not the husband's, committed the keeping of her children.

Murphy, in his own queer way, had been true to the trust. He lived with them and for them : he, always

the servant ; they, the young masters and mistresses. But somehow this surrender of himself had made itself felt ; boys and girls had ever turned to Murphy for advice, for comfort, for sympathy, for toffy, for support in any emergency, for small coin, for (later on this) an ample admiration—the one article, I am bound to say, that in this store was not purchasable. Murphy was a stern enemy of vanity in every form. Even now, when Nan is nineteen, and therefore a person to be considered, there is a sort of feeling running all through the gaunt old mansion, from garret to basement, that Murphy is the one member of the household to whom allegiance is due. As for the father——

Mr. Delaney—*The* Delaney, as he is, if he would but choose to air that title, suggestive of Ireland only—is nothing more just now than a dull old man. Sufficiently dull, indeed, to be obstinate, irritable, and unbearable on occasions. He had learned, even before his marriage, to be cantankerous, and almost hypochondriacal. What possessed the pretty woman he married to marry him is a question that even now puzzles her relatives.

Old as he is, however, he is still very much alive—

'annoyingly so,' says the aunt aforementioned, with an aggressive sniff. Though close on eighty, and remarkably close, too, to the end of his income, he still clings to life with a tenacity—I had almost said a vindictiveness—extraordinary; one not to be surpassed.

To the everlasting comfort of his family, however, he abhors society and closets himself alone all day and night, in that suite of apartments he has chosen for his own.

It is rather from his ancestors than from him that the children have inherited their beauty. Not but that there are good points in his face, or might have been before solitude and selfishness devoured them all. The Delaneys, as a rule, had been famed for their good looks, but very few of them can be traced in the last head of that handsome family.

His eyes are almond-shaped, a charm in some, but in The Delaney not so. It gives him, on the contrary, a sinister expression. His nose is long.

'Fit to pick a pipe,' according to Mr. Murphy, who, though respectful when brought face to face with his master, still holds him in a withering contempt. All

the old Delaneys were fox-hunting, 'divil may care,' brilliant, lively companions or masters; but this one— 'What on the airth ails him, at all, at all?' says Mr. Murphy periodically, as he dusts the books of the recluse, and sighs over the good days gone.

In truth, Mr. Delaney is not one to care for, or to regard with vehement affection. He has an objectionable way of snuffling, and of saying 'Tcha—tcha,' as if sneezing like a cat, when brought face to face with a disagreeable situation, that hardly endears him to his associates. If he was softly innocent with these unpleasant peculiarities, one might forgive him, but, as I have said, he is wonderfully wide awake. 'The divil wouldn't be up to him,' says Mr. Murphy, in those infrequent moments when he finds time for soliloquies, and a patient introspection of his acquaintances and intimates.

CHAPTER III.

' Dark was her hair, her hand was white,
 Her voice was exquisitely tender ;
Her eyes were full of liquid light,
 I never saw a waist so slender !
Her every look, her every smile,
 Shot right and left a score of arrows ;
I thought 'twas Venus from her isle,
 And wondered where she left her sparrows.'

MURPHY goes slowly up the stairs in search of his young mistress. The fact that she has only just recovered from a long and dangerous fever lends leisure to his step, and twenty times during his short journey does he curse the 'hussy' in the kitchen who had let Miss Nan know of her brother's dilemma.

But once having knocked at her door and gained admission, his courage returns.

'Arrah, Miss Nan, an' what are ye doin' that for now?' says he, tender reproach in his tone.

Miss Nan, thus addressed, gives a last dab of her handkerchief to her pretty eyes, and rises from the old lounge, on which she had cast herself in a sort of pretty despair half an hour ago. In her weak state of health, it had seemed to her that *all* things were going wrong with them, when the ‘hussy’ imparted to her the news of William’s adventure with the partridge.

As she comes quickly towards Murphy, the dazzling light of the July sunshine flings itself through the window, and on to her face. It isn’t anything like so pretty as Penelope’s, but there is an *espièglerie*—a suspicion of saucinesss, of sweetness, of gaiety, of *temper*; all now, however, toned by severe illness—that attracts. Her nose has a decided tilt upwards, her mouth is somewhat large ; but what has that got to do with it ? The nose has a character of its own, and a very good one, too, in spite of that tilt ; and the mouth is perfectly adorable, ever prone to laughter, or to grief, or to anger, or some such swift change ; and her eyes, soft, dark, and gray, are a heaven in themselves. If you could see her, you would know how superfluous it is to add that almost every young man in the county is in love with her.

Her pretty nut-brown locks have been shorn by some cruel barber, and the charming shapely head has now only little short ringlets, sunny here and there, to cover it. But it is a head nevertheless to be envied.

With a very tearful glance, she comes towards old Murphy, and lays her slender fingers in a nervous grasp upon his arm.

'Don't ye now! Don't ye, my dear!' says that kind if somewhat obsolete old person.

'Oh, how can I help it, Murphy? You know what a trouble that boy always is, and no one to keep him in order. You can see for yourself what little use father is—only made to curse and swear at us.'

'Don't ye now! Don't ye now *again*, my dear!' says Mr. Murphy imploringly.

'Why not? Why shouldn't I say it? I declare I'm sure he was born only to curse at the lot of us, and if Colonel Hume should take notice of this fault of Master William's I really don't know how we shall ever be able to hold up our heads again; and you tell me you have seen the Colonel—that he——'

'Oh, law! yes, miss. Faix, 'tis well I remimber

him, an' ivery cause I had to do it. It seems to me as if I could see him this minit, an' a bigger ould blaggard ye wouldn't meet in a day's walk. There wasn't the like of him from this to Dublin. The devil all out he was, miss, askin' yer pardon. A reg'lar tyrant! But, with quite a grand air, suggestive of very advanced socialistic views, 'sure tyrants must fall !'

'But oh, Murphy!' cries pretty Nan miserably, 'if the Colonel should go to extremes—if he should summon Master William—what *should* we do? Think of the disgrace of it!'

'Arrah! have sinse, miss. Where's the disgrace, I'd like to know?' says Murphy grandly, filled with a desire to allay the fears he has so steadily raised. 'What's a boy born for but to play the devil wherever he goes? Why, look here, miss, if you'll just let me show you how it was, you'll understand the innocence of that poor misjudged Masther William!'

Oh, if William could only have heard him!

'I wouldn't care,' says Miss Delaney, with a little half-sob, 'if it had been the first time; but William is *always* doing this sort of thing. You know, Murphy,

it is only a fortnight since he got into disgrace about those woods before.'

'Sure you know now, miss, that was only about a melancholy rabbit.'

'It doesn't matter *what* it was. He has been told the whole place is preserved, and that he is not to enter those woods, yet he will obey nobody.'

'Faix, that's thtrue for ye,' says Mr. Murphy, rubbing his chin. 'Masther William, I admit, is no thrate wherever he goes, but, sure, afther all he must live ; an' as I was sayin' awhile ago, miss, ye must make allowances for them boys. They were born to tormint ! But as for the rabbits ! Look here now, miss, an' I'll put it all straight before ye. Why, here's a boy, let us say,' illustrating this remark by throwing abroad his horny hand towards a bookcase, where surely no boy stands, 'an' here's the rabbit sittin' up as bould as brass upon his furry end ; and for a minute or so the two poor innocent crathures keep starin' at each other as if their eyes was glued to the spot. An' presently up gets the rabbit an' cuts across the grass like mad, for the bare life of him, an' away, *most naturally*, goes the boy afther him, an' the devil such a game ever ye

see, what wid the yellin's an' the tumblin's an' everything! An' afther a bit down pops the rabbit into a hole, an' down pops the boy on his knees an' begins to grub away the airth like a good one; an' thin, mind ye, there comes in a wee bit of a tarrier thing. I b'lieve I forgot to mintion him, miss, but sure ye know him—Masther William's own tarrier—a most innocent, harmless crathure, as ye'll acknowledge yerself, and a crathure born an' brought up on the premises, an' mild as new milk, an' widout iver so much as a bit of flesh taken out of one of the childher'scalves.'

Here Mr. Murphy, as if overcome by the strength of his own argument, pauses, and throws up his head with an expressive gesture.

'Well?' says Nan involuntarily.

'Weil, miss, the small tarrier, as is only the nature of the poor little honest baste, runs down the hole to say, "How d'ye do?" to the rabbit, an' presently, so pressin' is his attintions that up comes the rabbit, an' at the same moment up comes the boy's stick, an' down agin wid a good crack across the rabbit's back, an'—— An' why not?' demands Mr. Murphy, though, probably, he had not intended to finish his

history in this way. ‘What are they made for but to be killed? What on airth are they, afther all, but sinseless bits of fur, good for naught, an’ death on dacent turnips? Arrah! bad scran, say I, to those who would thry to stop the sport of one of the finest young gintlemen in Ireland!’

Oh, that William could but have heard him!

‘I’m afraid notice will be taken of this last offence,’ says Miss Delaney; ‘and the master—he *is* so angry. I hardly know what to do.’

‘He’ll cool down, miss. Haven’t ye got a new book at all, at all, that ye could presint to him? ’Twould be as good as a cowld bath to him.’

‘I feel as if I could bear anything but one of father’s attacks,’ says Nan tearfully.

‘Don’t be frightened, my dear. If the worst comes to the worst, I’ll spake to him,’ says Mr. Murphy, with a grandeur that hardly, however, impresses his listener. ‘What can he say, afther all?’ with a note in his voice that is suggestive of the idea that he is trying to back himself up, that is hardly sustaining to the other culprit. ‘The masther has a wonderful gift of the gab, I own, when once roused; but his bark is worse

than his bite, an' if things can be soothered down a bit——’ He pauses and looks at Nan, and then all at once his rage breaks forth. ‘Why, thin, who on airth could be the ignorant devil who tould on that boy?’ cries he. ‘There’s neither luck nor grace in whoever ’twas. I wouldn’t be Mike Twoomey now, if——’

‘Oh no, no! Have you not heard that it is a new keeper, an Englishman, who has charge of the preserves now?’

‘Och, murther! That’s bad! There’s no gettin’ over them English chaps!’ says Mr. Murphy, bringing up his hand once more to his chin, and beginning to scrape it thoughtfully. ‘Well, now, miss, an’ why don’t ye sind Masther William up to the house to beg the Colonel’s pardon? Masther William, though I confess he isn’t as handsome as a Delaney should be, has a twinkle in that left eye of his that would coax the birds off the bushes.’

‘He’s been coaxing one bird too many,’ says Nan, as though she couldn’t help it.

‘Ay, faith!’ says Mr. Murphy with a grin. ‘But about his going to the Colonel, miss? That would be a step in the right direction, eh?’

'I wonder would he go,' says Miss Delaney, brightening visibly, but speaking with a rather depressing uncertainty. Evidently, William is a person not to be easily managed.

'Sure ye know now, Miss Nan, he couldn't refuse you anything,' says Murphy boldly, though he himself is inwardly far from sure. 'I'm thinkin' I'll go an' speak to him about it, an' sind him here to ye.'

'Do, Murphy; and—and in case he won't go, Murphy, I think I'll go myself. Eh? The old Colonel *can't* be so bad that he couldn't be brought to see that a boy might do a thing like that, and yet not be so *very* much to blame.'

'He might, miss. He might indeed. Troth, he'd be a great blaggard if he couldn't see that.' There is, however, a note of doubt in Mr. Murphy's voice that belies his spoken sentiments. Plainly in his opinion the Colonel *is* a great 'blaggard.' 'But I'm bound to tell ye, miss, that in my day there wasn't a bigger tyrant out than that ould Colonel. He'd sarved in the Injies, and he thought we was all here no better than blacks. But we showed him the truth of *that*, plaze God. He found he couldn't ride over the Irish

peasant rough-shod ; an' he found a lot of other things, too. Oh, he was the dickens all out ! Troth, Miss Nan dear, I wouldn't at all like the thought of ye goin' up to the house, even to save Masther William.'

' But *why*, Murphy ? Somebody *must* go.'

' Well, he was the toughest ould customer. Faix, I doubt if even now, when his wig must be gray, ye could get the blind side of him. But I'll say this, Miss Nan, an' 'tisn't often I flatther you, as you'll bear witness, if anyone *can* manage the *comether* over him 'twill be yerself.'

' Still, I don't *want* to go,' says Nan, with a faint smile, 'if William will go by himself.'

' That's thtrue, miss. I'll be off wid meself an' say a word to him. It cuts me to the heart, Miss Nan, that ye should be so throubled. 'Pon me fegs——' This is Mr. Murphy's favourite oath, and he pauses on his way to the door to give utterance to it ; and if I do not leave you, dearest reader, with a repetition of it, through all the windings of this book, still, I entreat you, whenever it occurs to you that Mr. Murphy *ought* to swear, to put in this awful expletive.

‘Pon me fegs, miss, that boy ought to get a throuncing. But still, for the honour of the family, I agree wid ye that ‘tis only wise he should beg the Colonel’s pardon. But I warn ye, Miss Nan, an’ I know it to be me juty to tell ye beforehand, that all the Humes is a bad lot. They’re half English, miss, an’ what worse could I say to ye? But still, if Masther William won’t go be himself——’

‘I’ll go with him,’ says Nan, with a pale smile full of self-sacrifice. Truly Murphy’s statements with regard to the unknown Humes are not such as might hearten her.

‘You’ve more pluck than brains,’ says Mr. Murphy, as he beats a hasty retreat. That he means to be flattering is obvious; that he fails most lamentably can be seen by Nan’s countenance as she gazes upon the vanishing tails of his shabby coat.

CHAPTER IV.

'Enjoyment is fleeting, the proverbs all say—
Even that which it feeds upon fails ;
I've arrived at the truth of the saying to-day.'

IN the passage below, Mr. Murphy pounces on William, and with a diplomatic turn of mind worthy of a Bismarck addresses him.

'Yer sister's lookin' bad, sir,' says he, in a low, impressive tone.

'Which of 'em?' demands Master William, with a snarl and an open air of disbelief. It is evident that he has not forgiven that allusion to the lockup and the village constable.

'Now ye know, Masther William, I don't want to frighten ye, but Miss Nan looks real bad ; she do, my dear, she do indeed. This misfortunate crime of yours weighs heavy on her mind. Ye'd better do

something about it. Something, now, that would aise matters. I'd——' Mr. Murphy makes a long pause here. 'I'd not answer for her life if ye don't.'

'Oh, get out!' says William, with a disgraceful flippancy. He even goes so far on the road to ruin as to give Mr. Murphy a playful dig in the ribs.

'Very good, sir; take it as you like,' says Mr. Murphy, evading the dig and throwing quite a tragical note into his voice. 'Ye'll be sorry when it's too late perhaps, but I can tell ye I can see that in her face as might warn a *haythen*, and—— But never mind,' with an assumption of mild despair; 'what's the good at all of spakin' to a harum-scarum crathure like you, who wouldn't care if she was dead or alive?'

'Oh, come, I say,' says William, trying to laugh it off, but looking nervous.

'Tis the honest truth, any way, though sorry I am to say it. An' if you'll take old Murphy's advice, you'll go up at wonst to her an' tell her you're off to the new man to beg his pardon about that partridge —bad cess to it!'

'What!' roars William. 'Beg his pardon about a miserable bird that came in my way without being asked? No! a thousand times no! So there for you and for him! I'd see you both very well blessed first!'

'That's right. Take it in that way. I like yer spirit,' says Mr. Murphy, with exquisite sarcasm. 'But I'm tellin' ye this besides, me fine boy, that if ye persist in yer present ways, 'tis a cowld walk ye'll be takin' soon behind yer sisther's corpse to the family vault. Ochone! To think of it, and she so young an' so purty! Oh, who'd a-thought her own brother would be the one to sind her there!'

It would be impossible to put on paper the amount of reproachful misery that Mr. Murphy at this point throws into his voice; equally impossible to describe the agonized expression into which he screws all his available features. His eyes close up, his mouth widens, his ears expand, his nose—after all, he hasn't any nose to speak of: I don't suppose it does anything.

William has grown as red as a peony. Fight as he may against the fact, he is evidently deeply impressed.

'What are you talking to me like that for?' demands

he, in a loud and indignant tone, meant to cover his fear. ‘What abominable rot! She was as well as anything an hour ago. She——’

‘She purtends a lot, she’s that amiable, the crathure,’ says Mr. Murphy, who is delighted with his success so far, and is nobly bent on following it up, at any and every cost. ‘She purtends like a heyro, but there be raisons—docthor’s raisons,’ lying piously, ‘for what I say. Go up now, my dear, do—she’s cryin’ fit to kill herself—and tell her you will apologize to the ould Colonel.’

‘Go up there—up to the Castle? I think I see myself!’ says William, torn between a longing to save his sister from the cruel grasp of the ‘family vault,’ and a natural shrinking from bringing himself face to face with the enemy. ‘It isn’t likely! I won’t go there—all by myself. I wouldn’t know what to say to him, what to——’ Here his misery culminates into a burst of wrath. ‘One would think it was a hanging matter!’ cries he; ‘and, after all, it was only a bird. No; I won’t apologize by myself.’

The saving clause does not escape the educated ear of Murphy.

'If ye haven't the pluck to go there by yerself,' says that diplomatist, seeing the moment when concession means victory, 'I'm bound to tell ye that Miss Nan is willin' to go wid ye. She is faix ; wake an' all, as she is, the crathure ! But if the Colonel was to come down on ye she knows the masther will be tearin' round like mad for a month to come. An' now ye'll just get on yer Sunday clothes, an' take care there isn't a hole in yer stockin'. And be ready to start wid Miss Nan in half an hour.'

It must be admitted that though Murphy speaks with authority, there is a certain amount of temerity in the glance he now casts at William, that betrays a doubt of the latter's willingness to carry out the programme presented.

'All right,' says William gruffly.

It is a reprieve. Mr. Murphy brightens up again. The dismal facial contortions take their departure.

'Wisha more power to ye!' says he genially. "'Tis ould Murphy that knows ye! An' what a sound heart ye have in spite o' yer cackle !'

This dubious compliment being received without comment, Mr. Murphy beats a glorious retreat.

CHAPTER V.

'Out from the meadows there passed a maid—
How can I tell you why she was fair?
To see was to love, while she bent her head
Over the brooklet that murmured there.'

* * * * *

THE day has waned a little ; the softer touches that adorn the long sweet hours of summer as evening grows apace have now fallen in a tender cloud on wood and upland. Nan, with William—culprit William!—by her side, has climbed the wall that separates Rathmore from the castle, and is (heavily at heart) getting over the ground that stands between her and the apology that must be made.

Such lovely ground, too. A pity that any thought distressing should wander through it. They had come from the glaring light without on the hard road right into it, to find a delicious darkness that may be felt. Here and there, all round them, as

far as eye may see, rise up the trees, deepening the light that already is growing a little vague. No paths are here, no well-worn footmarks ; all is wild, untrammeled, silent.

To Nan, whose heart is full, and whose steps are languid, because of late terrible illness, the evening is rich in balm, that only nature can supply. These delicate winding ways in strange, sad woods, where only twilight reigns, is inexpressibly sweet to her.

She has been so near the grave, that her fresh return to earth, as it were, is doubly grateful to her. Though harassed now by her doubts and fears about this visit to an old and irascible Colonel to gain pardon for an erring brother, she still acknowledges the power of nature to make glad its lovers.

From the grave, that dullest of all things, to here —to the deeper, sweeter shades of life that lie in secluded woodlands. Dear heaven, what a reprieve !

‘ Truly this life is precious to the root,
And good the feel of grass beneath the foot ;
To lie in buttercups and clover bloom,
Tenant in common with the bees,
And watch the white clouds drift through gulfs of trees,
Is better than long waiting in the tomb.’

Oh, surely, surely.

But even through sylvan coverts and dainty groves thought that is most-times cruel will push itself. Nan, rousing from a blissful contemplation of the unsurpassable charms around her, returns to the dreary realities of life. A scolding is assuredly before her, an irate Colonel ahead of her. She is, in fact, on a voyage of discovery to lands unknown, but where at all events she does know that an old man with a vile temper is to be met with and interviewed.

'Oh bother! William! What a worry that boy has always been !'

'I do hope you have prepared some little speech to make to him?' she says at length, turning to William, who is trudging along beside her with an injured expression on his unhandsome face. 'It is the least you may do. Something conciliating, without being exactly abject. I've tried to do it, but I've failed, so I'm a lost prop. I find I am either insolent or positively servile. I fear even servility would not answer here.'

'I won't answer, at all events,' says William, who is plainly in a state of revolt. 'I've got nothing to say, insolent or otherwise.'

'You'll have to explain about it: To—to introduce the subject,' says Miss Delaney, with a sternness born of her anxiety. If he won't begin when face to face with this terrible old martinet of a Colonel, she will have to. This is a prospect scarcely to be borne.

'Well, I couldn't,' says William, as if finally.

'What nonsense! You are not an idiot, are you? You can put an idea into words! And you had better be careful, too, William. Murphy says he is an awfully strict old man, and specially hard on poachers.'

'What d'ye mean?' cries William, insulted. 'Did Murphy—do you—say I am a poacher?'

'Oh no'—coldly, rather. 'But still—— Murphy tells me he was very strict about the preservation of his game when he lived here long ago. Murphy remembers all about it; he says he prosecuted any number of people during his (Murphy's) time for snaring and poaching, and hunting them with greyhounds, don't you know.'

'No, I don't,' sulkily. 'I never heard of a partridge being hunted by a greyhound in my life. Murphy

may ! He seems to me to know an astounding lot.'

'Of course, William, you can disparage poor old Murphy if you will ; but, for my part, I think it would be better if in this instance you lent an attentive ear to him. At all events, he knows something about this new man, and you—we know nothing. Murphy says that the Colonel has a temper hardly to be rivalled for badness ; that he used to pay his keepers according to the numbers of poachers they brought in or convicted ; so, of course, they will make quite a point about you, and Murphy says, too, that—'

'Oh, bother him !' interrupts William, with noisy wrath. 'It strikes me that "Mister Murphy," as — with indignant scorn—'he calls himself, must have done a considerable amount of poaching in his time, to know so much about the game laws and the Colonel.'

'I don't think you ought to take it like that, William,' says his sister, in a long-suffering manner.

'Don't you ? Well, I do. You're in a wax with me now for abusing old Murphy ; but only for him this would have blown over, and you would not have

been dragged up here to see an old reprobate of a Col——'

William's words die upon his lips ; instinctively he drops his voice. Through the branching trees a stranger is seen approaching—a young man, tall, well-featured, with a cigar between his lips. This last he withdraws as he comes face to face with Nan.

It is only the meeting of a moment. He is here ; she can see him—he her ; and now he is gone. The envious trees close over her, and enshroud her from his view.

It was a mere passing glance she got, but Miss Delaney is of those who can see a good deal in a short time. That he was tall she could assure herself, and that, though his features were good, and built on strictly aristocratic lines, he was by no means a beauty. A man of about eight-and-twenty or thirty, with a kindly expression, but a suspicion of determination, that might on occasion sink to obstinacy, about his firm mouth, that was not altogether hidden by his moustache.

‘Who was that?’ says William in a whisper, meant

to represent caution, but which is louder and more penetrating than his usual stentorian tones.

‘Hush ! He’ll hear you. One of the Colonel’s guests, I suppose. Perhaps he brought some people with him. He has nephews, I think.’

‘Ugly chap,’ says William impartially.

‘I dare say. Everyone can’t be as lovely as you,’ says Nan, with a laugh, that arises out of this bit of sisterly wit.

‘I don’t believe he’s got a ha’porth of manners, anyhow,’ says William contemptuously. ‘He stared at you as if you had seven heads.’

‘Perhaps he wished I had—I dare say,’ aggravatingly, and with a little tilt of her charming chin, ‘he doesn’t often see anything so fine as me.’

‘I like that,’ says William, with huge disgust. ‘Give me a girl for conceit. I believe you think that pasty complexion of yours is the finest thing out—just like dough. Anyhow, it isn’t manners to stare.’

‘Charming manners in this instance,’ says Miss Delaney saucily. ‘He is evidently a thoroughly well brought-up young man ; has had his tastes cultivated ; knows a thing when he sees it. Now you, William,

are very backward. You should study me all day, and then you would be prepared to understand real beauty when you come face to face with it in your journey through life. See, Billy?"

She pinches Billy's ear as she finishes this astounding piece of vanity, and William, being one who loves a tussle, forgives her everything, and loses himself all at once in a wild romp. It ends in his favour, which still further restores him to a mood of excessive amiability. Miss Delaney, rather the worse for wear, sinks upon a bank, and sighs heavily, even as she laughs.

'Oh, William, what a bear you are!' cries she, panting. 'You should show some mercy. But I shall be equal with you yet. It is this horrid fever that has reduced me to so poor a frame of mind and body.'

'Oh, I forgot!' says William contritely. 'I shouldn't have had a wrestle with you just now. You do look white. I say, Nan, you aren't going to faint, are you?'

'Not I!' valiantly. 'Here, give me your hand. Let us go on to the house, and get this horrid business over.'

'That fellow looked kind,' says William. 'I wish he was at the house to help us out of our bother. But of course he is miles away by this time.'

A sharp turn in the avenue brings them at this moment within a few minutes' walk of the house. As they ascend the stone steps that lead to the hall door Nan's heart fails her. She moves with extraordinary deliberation for her, and at the very last, as she sees a tall footman advancing towards her through the cool big hall—the door being open—she says timidly to William :

'It is your affair. You ask for the Colonel.'

'Is—is your master in?' says William, somewhat loosely, and with a rather scared appearance, having all responsibility thus thrust upon him at a moment's notice.

'Yes, sir,' says the much beplushed one, with a certain hesitation. He regards William with a cautious eye. This shabby boy, who is still so unmistakably a gentleman, is plainly a puzzle to him. A glance at Nan satisfies him.

'Who shall I say, sir?' asks he, with extreme diffidence.

'William Dela—er—that is—— I say, you might speak,' says William, turning indignantly in his confusion to Nan, who is just behind him. His face is scarlet, his demeanour that of a condemned criminal. Considering the errand on which they have come, Nan feels this severely.

'Say Miss Delaney,' she murmurs gently to James, who, with perfect breeding, has stood apparently oblivious of asides, and confusion, and everything else. Another minute places her and the amateur poacher in a very select drawing-room, where she stands waiting miserably for the entrance of the terrible Colonel.

One, two, five minutes go by, and now at last the door opens. Somebody outside gives a direction to somebody else, probably a servant. But surely the Colonel (who must be seventy, if a day) cannot have a voice like that. The door is pushed wide open and a man enters.

It is the young man who had met them in the wood a while ago.

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CHAPTER VI.

‘ Surely Nature must have meant you
For a syren when she sent you
That sweet voice and glittering hair.’

NAN turns her large, rather pathetic, eyes on his. Perhaps the Colonel is out, and this—this nephew of his (she has already arranged that he must be a nephew) will intercede for William. But William, who surely ought to be the one to begin the argument, is hopelessly dumb, and a sense of nervousness holds her in check.

The young man advances slowly towards her.

‘ They tell me you wish to speak to me,’ says he very gently, battling with a tolerable success with the astonishment that is overpowering him.

‘ About that partridge,’ says Nan rather faintly. ‘ It—it is impossible to save William further;’ and she

points to that youth with a trembling hand. ‘It was killed by him,’ she says.

At this instant it occurs to her that she would dearly love to cry, but she suppresses the kindly emotion.

‘The partridge !’ echoes the young man vaguely, wildly. ‘What partridge?’ What on earth has a partridge got to do with the advent of this pretty girl ? It is all a blank to him.

‘A partridge that was killed here by William this morning. Here, in Hume,’ says Nan, making a desperate effort to explain matters. ‘I know how annoyed people are when their game is disturbed, and—’

‘I am not annoyed,’ says the young man, smiling.

‘You !’ staring at him. ‘Of course not. But the Colonel—’

‘Oh !’ says he. He seems all at once to be enlightened, and grows grave. ‘You have not heard, then ; you do not know that my uncle is dead.’

‘Your uncle ? Was—was he the Colonel ?’ asks Nan in a subdued voice.

‘Yes.’

'And he is dead?' She falters, blushes vehemently, and rises to her feet. 'Then you—you are——'

'John Hume,' says he calmly.

'Oh, that doesn't matter at all'— impatiently. 'What does matter is that you are the master here, and that it was your bird——'

'You're the master! Why, what a fuss we have been making about nothing!' cries William, taking the new man at his (William's) valuation, which is evidently a kindly one. He speaks in a triumphant and exceedingly loud tone, and by a providential interference only refrains from giving voice to an ecstatic 'Hurrah!' that must have been regarded as a demonstration of joy at the Colonel's timely decease.

'Nothing! How can you speak like that, William!' says his sister reproachfully. 'Everything remains just as it was, and you must now apologize to—to——' She glances at Hume.

'No, no. I won't listen to such a word as apology,' declares that young man, smiling. 'I,' turning to the lad, who is now again a little downcast—'I have not the pleasure of knowing your name as yet, but I feel

sure we must be near neighbours ; at least, I hope so ; and perhaps we shall be friends.'

'Oh yes, I'm sure of it' says the grateful William with the utmost encouragement in look and tone.

'That's right,' says Mr. Hume, smiling again ; and a right pleasant smile he has. 'And in a week or so from this I hope you will come up here very often, and help me and my friends to bring down some of these partridges, that I regret have been the cause of so much annoyance to you and—your sister ?'

There is a gentle question conveyed. Up to this he had, with much delicacy, devoted his conversation entirely to the appreciative William ; but now he lets his eyes rest on Nan, who is standing half in shadow, half in the brilliant sunshine, making a charming picture.

'Yes, my sister,' says William. Entirely country-bred as the lad is, and unknowing of the world and its courtly ways, he has still so much good old blood in him that a touch of hauteur, of pride, seems to fall upon him as he turns, and in a manner presents Nan to this supporter of his, who should have been his

judge. ‘This is Nan,’ says he gently, with all the garrulance of youth. ‘Our name is Delaney.’

It is a regular introduction, and Hume bows gravely to Nan, who returns the salute in kind. Something cold, unfriendly, in the girl’s face, however, drives him back to further converse with William, who is plainly open to advances of every kind.

‘I am glad to know your name and you,’ says he. ‘Do you know, I have been more lonely than I can tell you until this kindly partridge drove you to me. Well, I have your promise, then, to come up next month, and help me to thin them?’

‘Oh, thank you—you are awfully good!’ says William, fumbling with his hat, which is deplorably deficient about the brim, and growing red as any rose. ‘That would mean a gun, you see, and——’ He hesitates, and is finally so far lost that he cannot go on again.

‘Yours is an old one?’ questions Hume kindly.

‘I haven’t one at all,’ blurts out William, his complexion growing from red to purple.

‘Well, I should think not,’ says Hume, laughing.

'Your people would be mad to let a boy like you go about armed, and in this "distressful country," too. But,' looking at Nan, 'if I promise to see you safely through, do you think they would trust you to me ? Would you, Miss Delaney ?'

'You are very kind,' says Nan, whose words seem to come with an effort now, and whose face is very white. 'But I suppose a gun is not everything. There must be practice—one must be accustomed to shooting ; and William knows nothing of—'

'I do !' interrupts William, making his way into the argument with quite a desperate rush. Are all the halcyon days offered to him to be lost because of a secret as yet withheld from the family circle? 'Sullivan has lent me his gun often and often, and I've shot a lot of things when out with him.'

'Oh, William !' says Miss Delaney, as if the world had come to an end. The Sullivan in question is a notorious poacher in and about Rossmoyne, as the small village is called that lies about two miles from Rathmore.

'Well, a fellow must learn to shoot some time,' says William resentfully. 'And Sullivan isn't half

as bad as they try to make him out. If he does poach a bird or a hare now and then, why, what harm is——'

He stops dead short. Nan has moved away from him, and is addressing Mr. Hume with a quiet but rather shamed air that goes to William's wicked heart.

'You see,' says she, with a rather mirthless little smile, 'that it was useless my bringing him here. He doesn't see the right or wrong of it. He actually supports in your presence the most notorious poacher in the country. After this we can hardly expect that you will condone the fault that——'

'Nonsense! Oh, I beg your pardon,' cries Hume, strangely sorry to see that distress upon her brow. 'But really—— He is your brother, Miss Delaney. You must, then, be accustomed to boys, and still you would condemn my friend here,' laying a hand on William's shoulder, 'because he thinks that all wild things were created for the enjoyment of every man. The game laws are iniquitous to him so far; and why not? When I was his age'—with a light and merry laugh—'I don't believe there was a more

disgraceful young poacher than I was in the whole of Ireland.'

'If you speak to him like that,' cries Nan, turning a sweet but angry, and very exhausted, face to his, 'you may expect to see him, later on, a victim of the law!'

She is apparently rather proud of this awful speech, and though tears gather in her eyes, she surveys him angrily through them.

'There won't be any law if he comes shooting with me,' says Hume gently.

'But the gun belongs to Sullivan, and he mightn't lend it?' says William in quite a low voice for him.

'Of course not, when you are having a day with somebody else,' says Mr. Hume. 'And as for that, I always keep a certain number of guns in the armoury to accommodate my guests.' This is a perfectly bald and open lie, but I regret to say that Mr. Hume tells it with a face that is unabashed. 'One of those guns will always be at your disposal!'

'Oh, I say!' breathes William, who is too far gone in joy at the prospect held out to him of being set loose upon the world with a fire machine to kill any

one or thing that comes within his reach, to be able to put his gratitude into a more graceful form of speech. ‘Nan—did you hear? I can come, can’t I?’

‘Yes,’ says Nan. Even the effort of giving this small permission seems to be too much for her. Her hand, that had been resting on the back of a chair, gives way, loses its hold altogether, and with a sharp sigh she falls into the chair itself. It is only a moment’s unconsciousness, but it terrifies the lookers-on.

William, indeed, shows signs of extreme self-reproach. The other onlooker is, of course, exempt from that; but nevertheless, of the two, he seems the most distressed. In this life, as you will perceive, my clever reader, this is often the case.

‘She is ill—she is fainting,’ says Mr. Hume, his face nearly as white as that pretty one over which he is bending.

‘Oh dear! what’s the matter with her now?’ says William, seizing hold of Nan’s head, and lifting it so high that Mr. Hume interposes. ‘Nan—Nanny, speak to me.’ This affectionate appeal being dis-

regarded by his sister, he turns for comfort to Hume.

'I'm a horrid boy!' says he, half weeping; 'I'm a beast! And she's been so ill, too. Awfully ill. Murphy says she will soon go to the family vault.'

'Hold your tongue!' says Mr. Hume sharply, who can see that Nan is recovering consciousness quickly. 'You must be a fool to talk like that! Good heavens! if she were to hear you, she——'

'She won't. She often faints like that since she's had the fever,' says William, still so contrite that he forgets to resent the other's tone. 'She wasn't fit to come here to-day, but she would do it, because of me. Murphy said it would be the death of her, but——'

'Who is Murphy?' asks Hume, and, having asked the question, is filled with a sort of astonishment towards himself, in that he can feel such undeniable curiosity towards people of whose existence he was ignorant an hour ago.

'He's our servant,' says William. 'We haven't got many, only him, indeed, and Mrs. Moriarty; but Murphy, Nan says, is a host in himself. I'm jolly

glad,' with an affectionate glance at Hume, 'that all hosts aren't like him. I'm sure Murphy would have sent me to prison and given me nothing but bread and water for a month if he stood in your shoes.'

'Murphy seems to be a sort of modern Brutus,' says Mr. Hume. He is bending over Nan, and gently chafing the pretty hands that lie so passively in his. 'I wonder he didn't see the injustice of letting your sister walk up here to-day in her weak state of health.'

'It was my fault, not his. He was mad about it. But I—I was afraid to come by myself,' says William, blushing furiously with shame and confusion, yet getting through the base admission like a man—more honestly, indeed, than would most men! 'She's been dreadfully ill, and as weak as a cat. Last Thursday was the first day she was out for a month and more. How are you now, Nan? You're better, aren't you now?'

This very anxiously to the girl, who has got back some colour by this time, and who is making an effort to rise.

'No, don't stir—don't!' entreats Mr. Hume.

'It is nothing, nothing really,' says Miss Delaney, with an eager desire to smile, that only betrays how seriously ill she is feeling. 'If I were only in the open air—— This room is so warm—and our house is very near. William, I——'

'No, don't speak—don't stir,' says Hume again nervously. Unconsciously he presses the hand he is holding, and Nan, with a sharp rush of blood to her white face, quickly withdraws from his grasp that charming member.

'I am so angry with myself—so sorry!' says she. 'But I thought I could manage it—I—it was the heat, I suppose.'

'Well, rest there, for a moment at all events,' says Hume, hurrying from the room; and Miss Delaney, in spite of her protest, is still so far a prey to the weakness that has been her companion night and day for so many weeks, that she gladly sinks back into the comfortable chair, and leaves fate and William to dispose of her.

Presently Hume returns, bringing with him in his hands (minus tray or any of the customary accessories) a small bottle of champagne and a glass. It

is impossible for Miss Delaney not to see that he had refused to call the servants to his assistance, and had, therefore, been reduced to the exercising of his own wit in this little matter of hospitality. It is impossible, too, not to acknowledge the delicacy that had led to this act. Gossip in small country towns runs riot, and this he has spared her. Of her visit to Hume Castle all the world will know to-morrow doubtless; of the fact, that she was so unfortunate as to faint there, the world will know nothing.

‘Drink this,’ says Hume gently. Seeing her hesitate, he hands the glass to William. ‘Make your sister drink it,’ he says; whereupon William, who is nothing if not sternly practical, seizes her round the neck, and, holding her in a vice, as though afraid she may run away before the accomplishment of his fell design, presses the glass against her lips. There is only, therefore, strangulation or champagne before Nan, and being a wise girl, she accepts the milder alternative.

It does her more immediate good than she could have believed. Once again her young blood begins to

course merrily within her veins ; her colour grows more perfect ; she rises lightly to her feet.

'I have much to thank you for,' she says, holding out her hand to Hume. 'For your goodness to William ; for—'

'You are better—surely better?' asks he, ignoring the gratitude she would have given voice to.

'Not better—well ! I am sorry to have been so troublesome,' with a quick blush, 'but—'

'Don't put it like that,' says he, with a smile that is half a frown. 'And if you will go now, let me order the carriage for you.'

'Oh no ! not for worlds !' in a little horrified tone. Heavens ! Fancy driving up to the hall door at home in a carriage and pair, in all probability, and in all probability, too, this young man beside her, who should, she still feels, have been a gray-haired martinet of an old colonel. She can figure to herself all the younger branches of the family rushing in a body to the door to find out for themselves the meaning of her triumphant return, and all their questions and comments, and Hume's calm criticism on it all, and—and that shabby old drawing-room.

'I really think you had better,' says Hume, still dwelling on the carriage that has caused her so much troubled thought.

'Thank you—but no, indeed,' says she decisively. 'Why, our home is not a quarter of a mile from here.'

'Oh, so near!' says Hume. He seems unaccountably pleased at this intelligence 'Well, I shall see you safely home, at all events, if only to assure myself that no further troubles overtake you.'

Nan laughs. Plainly he is a persistent young man, not got rid of easily.

'Come, if you like,' says she, seeing nothing else is left her. A wild hope that the children's pinafores will, by some miraculous agency, be clean, or that those terrible imps will be lost to sight in the back garden, runs through her mind; and then she follows Hume through a pretty side door, all glass, and half covered by draperies of soft Indian silks, into a conservatory, and from that into the open air.

CHAPTER VII.

‘ She smiled on many, just for fun ;
I knew that there was nothing in it.’

‘ WHAT a lovely house !’ says Nan, with sincere admiration.

‘ It will be all right after a bit,’ returns he carelessly. ‘ But in spite of the fellows I sent down to see to it, it wants a good deal still. I am afraid you are taking away a rather unkindly memory of it to-day, but next time you come——’

‘ Next time,’ says Nan, opening her eyes. ‘ Oh, surely my one mistake will be sufficient.’

‘ But when my sister arrives, in about three weeks or so, I hope you will be good enough to call on her,’ says Hume pleasantly. ‘ And that—though, of course, I have no right to ask any favour of so great a

stranger—that you will help me to make the country agreeable to her.'

'We'll call, of course,' says Nan, who has somehow begun to feel dispirited. 'But as to—'

'If she's depending on us to make the place lively for her, she'll have a bad time of it,' says William, with an outburst of merriment that Nan in her anger calls a 'guffaw.' 'You should see father! The very thought of a dance, or a picnic even, puts his hair on end like an old tom-cat, and besides—'

'William!' says Miss Delaney, in an awful tone.

'Well—what?' retorts William sulkily. 'I was only going to say, "And besides that we have no money!"'

This is terrible! And to so utter a stranger, too. As if overcome by William's awful frankness, Miss Delaney lays down her arms.

'Well, we haven't,' says she monotonously, and then all at once something in the whole situation strikes her as being comic to the last degree. She struggles with herself ineffectually, and finally breaks into irrepressible laughter.

Such merry, happy, musical laughter! Was ever

music sweet or gay as it? Hume, who has been bred amongst such town misses as have been taught that open demonstrations of any kind of mirth, or joy, or anger, are only for the vulgar, is electrified by it into a passionate admiration. What a young girl she is! What a sweet, delicate touch of youth enshrouds her, glorifying every movement of her *svelte* body!

All at once—it is the most unaccountable, the most absurd thing in the world, he admits—but at this moment it does occur to him how often his friends have suggested to him the charms of the married state. Idiots, he had been rude enough to call them to himself often and often; yet were they such idiots, after all? A wandering doubt about his pet belief begins to play havoc with his mind.

William, whose sulky moods are never proof against laughter, here gives in to Nan's joyous mirth, and presently Mr. Hume, as if unable to restrain himself, joins in with the brother and sister, and the trio—who would have been puzzled to explain the cause of their jollity if put to it—laugh unreservedly until the entrance gate is reached.

One outcome of this general camaraderie is that

Nan there and then loses all sense of the shyness that but half an hour ago distressed her so keenly when in the presence of the master of Hume Castle. Then he was an autocrat, a being to be dreaded, a creature on whom William's reputation depended. Now he is a fellow-mortal, and one, whispers this deplorable coquette to herself, not altogether blind to her charms. To create contempt in a woman for a man, assure her that the man is hopelessly in love with her. After that render to him your deepest commiseration, for she'll lead him a life that——

It is now evening. The giant sun has dropped asleep; all Nature lies quiescent, as if dreading to awake him. Up high, far away, a faint pale moon has climbed the heavens, shadowy, uncertain, as though afraid of its own audacity. Such a young Diana! In thought Mr. Hume compares it to the pale, slight girl by his side—so fair, so fair. Could she ever hear, or care to hear?

Just outside the gateway, two young men coming leisurely up the road meet their eyes. William gives way to a boisterous shout of welcome.

‘Here’s Freddy Croker,’ cries he.

Mr. Croker acknowledges this joyous recognition with due gratitude.

'My beloved William,' says he, 'this is indeed a pleasure!' He holds out his arms with the evident intention of pressing William to his bosom, a kindly, not to say affectionate, act, viewed, however, by William with distinct suspicion.

'Oh, bother!' says that youth, eluding the promised hug, and getting behind Mr. Hume, who is looking at these two new neighbours of his with some interest.

Croker, who is about Hume's own height, is a stalwart man of twenty-seven, with brown hair, brown eyes, brown skin. A very ordinary young man, with nothing in particular to distinguish him from dozens of his fellows, except, perhaps, the very lovable expression that makes his large mouth almost handsome. Hume, after one swift glance at him, takes his measure to a nicety, and decides upon liking him; but the other—Croker's companion—is of an altogether different type.

A very slight man, less than middle height, with a sallow complexion, and black hair and eyes—peculiar eyes, deep, searching, almost fierce. There is a touch

of self-repression about the whole face that irresistibly attracts, and warns one vaguely that a volcano, in all possibility, may lie beneath that studiously calm exterior. The black eyes are now fixed on Miss Delaney.

'Why, Nan,' says Croker, with all the freedom of an old friend, "'tis a cure for "sair een" to see you outside the walls of Rathmore. Better, eh?'

'Rather foolish, isn't it?' says his companion, whose name is Ffrench—Boyle Ffrench, bachelor, captain in her Majesty's 14th Hussars. 'It should be something very special that induced you to try your strength like this.'

There is a coldness in his tone, and yet an almost burning interest that strikes on Hume's ear.

'You are right: it was something special,' says Miss Delaney, with a little laugh, that has a good deal of nervousness in it. That she has just come out of the gates of Hume, with its master by her side, is apparent to all beholders. How is she to explain her presence here? At any other time, under different circumstances, she would have found it quite a simple matter to give a graphic description of William's

crime, and her rush to the rescue—to these two old friends ; but just now, with the old tired feeling on her and this strange man by her side, she finds all at once that words have failed her, and ideas too.

Will they think she has been making an evening call on Mr. Hume ? A nervous desire to laugh at this absurd reading of her presence here is mingled with a most unjust indignation towards Hume, that he has failed to be that respectably odious old Colonel he ought to have been.

‘Something special here?’ asks Ffrench. His glance seems to just touch the gates of Hume. There is ill-suppressed excitement in his tone and expression, and his sallow complexion seems to Hume—who is intently watching him—to grow a shade paler.

‘Sits the wind in that quarter?’ says he to himself ; and all at once that curious desire for victory that reigns in all breasts, that longing to overcome, grows warm within him, and thrills him to keener life. The idea is formless, and barely living, yet he has decided within himself that this girl beside him shall marry him—not Ffrench ; nor any other man. But, by all the powers of earth, not Ffrench !

Besides that excitement, there had been just a suspicion of insolence or something nasty in the latter's tone, born no doubt of passionate jealousy, but none the less objectionable.

'Yes; here. It was about William——' begins Nan, and then falters and pauses as if at a loss how to go on. She is looking very white and tired—terribly white. Hume, with his customary gracious smile on his lips, turns to her :

'You will introduce me to your friend?' says he, and, having obtained the introduction, goes on fluently :

'Yes; I am afraid it was the fault of our young friend here,' giving William's ear a gentle tug. 'It appears that he and a partridge came into collision—a skirmish that ended badly for the partridge. And Miss Delaney, believing me to be my own uncle, who, poor man! (I never saw him) has been dead a month or more, came up here this afternoon to gain absolution for this erring mortal—this deplorable sinner;' he once again pinches the deplorable sinner's ear, who, lost to grace, gives way to light laughter beneath this punishment. 'I have given you the story in one chapter, for which you should be grateful,' says Hume,

laughing. ‘It wasn’t worth a line more, eh?’ addressing Ffrench directly, who looks back at him with his impenetrable eyes, but says nothing.

‘Not half a one,’ says Croker. We have just come from Rathmore, where Penelope,’ to Nan, ‘told us all about it.’

‘Why, you knew,’ cries Nan quickly, her eyes on Ffrench, who seems a trifle uneasy beneath their fire—‘you knew everything, and yet you asked! Well, now, why, I wonder?’

There is something in her tone that compels an answer. Ffrench, after a swift glance at her, acknowledges that.

‘Surely you know why,’ says he in a low tone, meant for her alone—a tone fraught with love, meant to remind her of his passion, but meant, too, to avoid a more difficult explanation of his conduct.

‘We saw Penelope; she told us,’ says Croker.

There is something in the way he mentions Penelope’s name that betrays his interest in that pretty creature. ‘Are you going home now, Nan? Well, we’ll go with you.’

So together they all return to Rathmore, reading

each other as they go, and there Hume makes the acquaintance of Penelope, and Gladys, and the others, the pinafores of 'the others' being in a highly advanced stage of dirt, the owners of them having spent their afternoon on the borders of the duck-pond.

CHAPTER VIII.

'My aunt ! my poor deluded aunt !
Her hair is almost gray :
Why will she train that winter curl
In such a spring-like way ?'

'WELL, dears, this seems to be quite a godsend, this neighbour of ours,' says Mrs. Manly, entering the Rathmore drawing-room—a most dilapidated spot—a week later.

She is the one member of the Delaney family, outside the immediate family circle, who is to them well known—their mother's, not their father's sister, a small, sprightly, well-meaning, but unsympathetic woman, who had grossly offended an aristocratic but impious family by marrying a Dublin merchant. She was the youngest of that family, and perhaps had tired of the perpetual shifts and make-believes that had helped them to get through life to their own

respect but with indescribable discomfort ; and when occasion threw a comfortable competence in her way, an existence where the worry of unpaid bills need never be known, closed with it, and, defying public and family comment, married a low-born but otherwise most estimable merchant.

It had surprised her to find that he held quite a good position in Dublin, that he was known there in very proper circles, and that she—his wife—cut no poor figure even at the ‘Cawstle,’ as it was there called. Brewers and distillery men were not to be lightly regarded in ‘Dublin town,’ and the despised Manly was better than the general ruck. He was on the point of renovating a parish church, and raising it to the rank of a cathedral, when mighty Death intervened, and, seizing him, he died.

He had lived, he had made money, he had died—the one correct action of his life, said her relations ; at all events, he did die, and left his widow a very considerable fortune, to which she was by no means indifferent. Perhaps she thought she had earned it hard by marrying beneath her, because she clung to it lovingly. She was, indeed, what is vulgarly termed

close-fisted, and saw very strong reason for it, before she parted with a five-pound note to anyone but herself. To the latter, however, she was nobly liberal.

She calls herself thirty-five, which proves her integrity, as she still wants a month or two of forty. A woman between thirty and forty always considers herself much younger than does a woman between twenty and thirty. Julie Manly—she affects the sprightly, spirituelle manner that she believes belongs to her French neighbours, however, and objects to the common Julia. *Julie* now ! How sweet ! how musical ! She would be called Julie by all her friends ; a touch of frivolity sternly set upon by her Delaney nieces, who call her Julia in season and out of it. The latter, the fair Julie objects to most, as it means when half the county is present.

She is one of those essentially selfish beings who, with a heart of wood, have also a most affectionate manner—a real, lovely, caressing manner, that an angel might be proud of. It impresses most people, and prepossesses them in her favour ; but not her nieces, and least of all—Murphy. That autocrat of

the breakfast and luncheon and dinner table at Rathmore regards her ever with a malevolent eye.

'To see her rigged out in all the colours of the rainbow, for all the world like an ould paycock!' he would say, 'an' them poor childer badly off for want of a silk gown, that should be theirs by rights——Arrah! may the devil fly away wid her for an ould skinflint, say I. Faix, I wish I could buy her in at my price, an' sell her at her own, an' I'd be a made man for life.'

But these flowers of speech on the part of Mr. Murphy, though now and then delicately conveyed to her by her maid, fail to waken Mrs. Manly to a sense of her meanness. She treats them as she considers the author ought to be treated, with silent contempt, having conceived as violent a dislike for him as that honest if somewhat aggravating old person has cultivated for her.

For Julia—the Delaney girls never call her 'aunt,' except on the 'out of season' occasions—for Julia to ever dream of herself as possessing a fault would be to upset every theory she has ever entertained. She is indeed generosity itself to her own virtues, to say

nothing of her vices. Should she elect to gown herself in the latest Paris fashions (and she always does so elect), it is simply because Providence has meant her to dress herself according to her station in life, and so far as lieth in her to be a help and a comfort and a blessing to the poor sempstresses and fitters and inventors that go to make up the big sum of those who seem born but to titillate the extravagances of the rich. Should she (which is very seldom) send a cheque to the infirmary in the next town, it is not because she wishes to curry favour with the gentry round, and my Lord Bishop, who is intimately connected with it, but because a Heaven-sent spirit is hers. She is, indeed, rather a favourite with the Bishop, who, good man, has no time to discern between cheques and godly living.

‘A downright godsend !’ says Mrs. Manly, picking out by instinct the one comfortable chair in the drawing-room, and descending carefully into it. It would be an atrocity to destroy the perfect build of this her latest gown from Worth that she is wearing. She is on her way to an afternoon at Lady Cashelmore’s, and has dropped in on the Delaney girls, secretly to

show her gown, openly to talk about John Hume. The Delaneys had received a card for the Cashelmore garden-party, too, but a dearth of gowns had compelled them to send a refusal.

'A young man, girls! An event in itself. And by no means destitute of coin. Well! What under heaven can send a young man here, who has money to go elsewhere, passes my comprehension.'

'Therefore it would be useless for anyone else to try to comprehend it,' says Penelope calmly. 'Where are you going, Julia? You are magnificent enough for a North American war-dance.'

'To Cashelmore?' says Julia with dignity.

'Do you mean to Lord Cashelmore? Has he sent for you in person?' demands Nan. 'Shows his taste, say I. But a little pronounced, eh, Julia?'

'He'll marry you, if you don't look out,' says Gladys. who is a saucy little thing in spite of her angel face.

'Ah, you girls! you girls!' cries Julia, in a gushing tone, rather pleased than otherwise at the suggestion of Gladys. 'I wish one of you were coming with me. You might have a chance, whereas your old auntie——' Here she laughs in a little tittering conscious manner

that incenses the girls beyond bounds, and suggests the idea that her being too old for anyone is out of the question, and quite an amazingly good joke.

'Why, aren't you coming to support me?' cries she, blind to their disgusted looks. 'I can't bear to put in an appearance alone.'

'You really can't suppose, Julia, that we would go to Lady Cashelmore's in those old gowns,' says Nan indignantly, sarcasm having at last given place to righteous anger. 'Not likely! It is a simple thing to stay at home; it is an abominable thing to go out shabby.'

'Well, really now, I think you looked very well in those white frocks of yours,' says Mrs. Manly with a cheerful smile.

'When? At the Leslies'? It was awfully good of you to think so,' says Penelope, 'considering it was for that occasion they were washed for the fifth time.'

'No; you don't say so!' says Julia with delicious astonishment. 'Well, I always have said that there is nothing like a good linen for wear. By-the-bye, how do you like my bonnet, girls? Tasty, eh?'

'Very handsome,' says Nan coldly, almost defiantly. It is her own longing to say something uncivil that she is defying. Penelope, not being so sure of her powers of self-suppression, takes refuge in a severe fit of coughing that threatens to part her soul from her body, but Gladys, at all events, is equal to the occasion.

'I have always wondered,' says she in her clear soprano, 'why it is that those perfect bonnets are so dreadfully unbecoming.'

Tableau!

Gladys, declining to be withered by the glances bestowed on her by both her sisters, sits gazing with quite an infantile unconsciousness at her outraged aunt. The aunt at least should have felt outraged, but Mrs. Manly is too well assured of her own charms to let herself feel flouted by the untutored criticism of a child.

'Dear little Gladys—so crude, so charmingly down-right,' says she, with a smile that brings 'dear little Gladys' to a rather dangerous state of mind. 'Well, I'm sorry the bonnet doesn't please you, dear; but one can't dress to suit every taste. Boyle, at

all events, was very complimentary about it. He is to be here presently to take me on to Cashelmore.'

Boyle Ffrench is her nephew, the son of a brother long dead, and therefore cousin to the Delaneys. With a captaincy in the Hussars, and a paltry five hundred a year, he is about as poor a young man as one need know. That Mrs. Manly has money, that he has as good a right to it, or even a better than anybody, is a thought that frequently remains with him. It is natural, strengthened by the fact that, though she has never openly declared him her heir, she has stood to him in little matters, and makes it a thing of course, that he should spend his leave at Ballybrack, her place.

'Well, and how's your father?' asks she presently.

'We don't know,' says Nan. 'That he is alive we do know, because his breakfast-tray was sent to him this morning, and, unless he has conjured up a familiar to eat it for him, he certainly finished his poached eggs. But you know it is as much as our lives are worth to make an attempt to enter his room. Last

time Bartle tried—— Well, you know all about that. And I'm sure we're not likely to forget it.'

'*Such a row!*' says Penelope.

'It's disgraceful!' says Mrs. Manly, with more real warmth of manner than she has yet shown. 'But your mother spoiled him. What a man! What a father! Good gracious, has he no sense of responsibility? Does he think he brought you into this world only to ignore you? I wish to goodness I could get at him to give him a piece of my mind.'

'A piece would do no good; it would take the whole of the biggest mind in Europe to make him view us in the light of anything save encumbrances,' says Nan, hardly bitterly, yet with a touch of discontent.

'Well, I hope he will so far rouse himself as to give you some money soon,' says Mrs. Manly. 'You'll want it, as I intend to give a dance the week after next.'

'Oh!' cries Nan, her eyes sparkling; she has just bought and made up a charming evening gown.

'Oh!' cries Penelope, with sincere dismay. She has spent her last month's money on a hat, and boots,

and gloves, fondly believing an evening gown in Rossmoyne to be entirely useless.

'Oh!' cries Gladys, craning forward her long young neck, and fixing her aunt with a captivating smile.

'You'll ask me, too, Julia, won't you?' says she.
'Ah, you will now—what?'

'Certainly not,' says Mrs. Manly severely. 'What, a baby like you, that ought to be in the schoolroom, if your father was a father. Nonsense, child! I can't imagine how you could suggest such a thing. But, really, I often think the world is turning upside down.'

'Oh, never mind; it doesn't matter,' says Gladys, with an attempt at bravery, that does not hide from Nan or Penelope the fact of her having tears in her eyes. In truth she is bitterly disappointed; and one thought adds poignancy to her regret. 'If—if only she had recollect'd to call her Julie, perhaps—perhaps—'

'Gladys is sixteen,' begins Nan earnestly. 'A great many girls go out at sixteen, and Gladys has so few—'

'Girls without two elder sisters!' says Mrs. Manly,

with all the air of a thorough worldling. This is an air which she produces now and then, and on which she prides herself. ‘No, not another word, Penelope. I know what is due to you three poor motherless girls, if nobody else does.’

In her heart, she fondly believes she is the guardian angel of her dead sister’s children.

‘How those poor dear creatures at Rathmore would get on without me——’ is her usual beginning of many a conversation with her neighbours round. And though now Penelope, and now Nan, beseech her in turn, she is deaf to their charming, and declines altogether to give Gladys an invitation to her dance. Perhaps the knowledge that already she has considerably more women than men on her invitation cards has a good deal to do with her virtuous refusal.

‘My dear Gladys, keep your youth while you can,’ says she to the disgusted Gladys. ‘Years hence you will be glad of my refusal of to-day: even your sisters are, in my opinion, almost too young for a big affair such as I propose having.’

Here the hearts of Nan and Penelope beat high.

‘But then,’ goes on the moralist slowly, ‘one can’t

be too hard, and Nan'—here she looks at the girl, and, as though struck by something in the extreme beauty and girlishness of her, says earnestly: ‘you are looking well to-day, Nan! So young, so fresh!’

‘Am I?’ says Nan, laughing. ‘Pity, then, that there is no one to admire me!’ She half breathes out these words with a large yawn, for the proper execution of which (that is, the latter) she raises two long lovely arms high above her head.

‘Well, just now, to-day, perhaps not. But what is this I hear about the new neighbour—about Mr. Hume? It was partly the reports that I have been hearing that have caused me to come here to-day. Is it true that he is here morning, noon, and night?’

For a moment the girls hesitate; it is indeed quite true: that one day’s introduction being accomplished—that day on which Mr. Hume brought back Nan to Rathmore—he has come there regularly every day since, establishing, one hardly knew how, a friendship with the entire family. As for the children, they adore him!

'Well, hardly night,' says Nan. 'Providentially we are spared that. The descent of kindly eve generally removes him from our tired eyes.'

'Then it's true what I've been hearing? He is here perpetually. And,' says Mrs. Manly, leaning forward and speaking in an eager, confidential manner, 'what brings him now, eh? eh?'

'Nan,' returns Penelope briefly, but graphically.

'Oh, nonsense!' cries Nan, with a laugh and a faint blush. 'That's too absurd. You might just as well say it was Gladys.'

'Indeed you might not!' declares Gladys indignantly. 'Well, I like that! when he never looks at me or Pennie, and is always asking you to go out with him into the garden to look at the late roses; I don't believe,' scornfully, 'he knows a thing about roses; and, at all events, there are no roses in the arbour, and—'

'My dear Gladys, he is quite a lover of roses,' interposes Penelope promptly. 'And, you know he told you he took a first prize for them at his place in England,' says Nan, both girls speaking at once, as if to hide that allusion to the arbour from the two wake-

ful ears of the aunt. It is a delicate word-hustling that drives Gladys into a corner.

'His gardener got it, perhaps,' murmurs she, with a last attempt at self-assertion; but a second glance from Penelope, full of entreaty, subdues her quite. Mrs. Manly's senses, however, being of the wakeful order, nothing has escaped her.

'So it is you, Nan,' says she thoughtfully.

'A fiction, I tell you,' returns Nan gaily. 'What really brings him here is the fact that he has nothing whatever to do, and that he is bored to death up there all by himself in that big house. Nothing so difficult to shake off as an idle man. When his sister comes, and his troop of friends, you will see how few and far between his visits here will be.'

'Men are like that,' says Mrs. Manly slowly, as if not following her own words, but rather some inner thought. 'Still—— Really, Nan, you should have come with me to-day. There is never any knowing what may happen. And that linen gown would have done uncommonly well. Nothing like simplicity, sweet simplicity, for a quite young girl—a child like you!'

To Mrs. Manly anybody under twenty-five is a 'child.' To so place them is to prove herself still young. Anybody under sixteen is 'a baby'; she would, indeed, have kept the latter order 'in arms,' if possible. Anybody above thirty is, however, of her own age.

Thus she would appeal to her nephew Boyle Ffrench, who is thirty-one. 'People of our age, you know, my dear Boyle, should be aware of—So and so.'

'Simplicity and rags hardly mean the same thing,' says Nan, a little bitterly. 'No, no. If one can't be decently dressed, better stay at home.'

'Rags! Don't give yourself the habit of talking like that,' says her aunt sharply. It has occurred to her that of late the girls have been looking rather shabby. 'Good heavens! a decent linen gown, without a hole in it, to be called rags. See here now, I really think you had better run upstairs and change your mind and your frock at the same instant, and come with me to Cashelmore.'

'Don't distress yourself about it, Julia. I assure you it would be an unwise move. I don't believe I

should captivate Mr. Hume in that old frock,' says Nan, with a rather sarcastic little smile. 'I should only ruin all your hopes. Give it up, Julia. I was never meant to be great. Like the modest violet, born to blush unseen, I shall probably so marry that I shall sink out of the sight of all my well-to-do relatives.'

There is something mocking in her whole air that angers her aunt. Bent on the settling of her niece in such wise as shall do credit to herself, and raise her influence in the county, which, in spite of the money accruing from it, had been lowered by her marriage, she feels now thoroughly put out by the girl's manner.

Is it possible that she can for a moment intend to play fast-and-loose with a man who can count his thousands more readily than another man his hundreds? The girl must be mad.

'You may well blush for such a speech as that,' says she wrathfully. 'Seen or unseen, really it's disgraceful the way you girls talk nowadays. Not to speak of the sinfulness of throwing away such an opportunity as Providence has now thrown in your path!'

'Is Mr. Hume an opportunity?' asks Penelope, who is growing angry for Nan's sake.

'Ha, ha, ha!' laughs Gladys gaily, totally unimpressed by the situation. 'You should spell it with him, Nan. You know! Forfeits, you know.'

Something in the child's unrestrained merriment affects them all. After a struggle their Irish natures assert themselves, and they join in her joyous laughter, Julia herself being the gayest of them all.

'Children like that never have an ounce of sense,' says she, nodding her head at Gladys. It is the one little allusion to the late disagreeableness that she allows herself—and yet it is not always easy to change a conversation—cudgelling her brains to find a new topic that shall make them entirely forget the last, she all at once remembers something.

'Girls,' cries she, 'do you know who I hear is dying?'

'Dying!' exclaim they all, leaning forward.

'Yes; old Mrs. Carty, up there at Duffy's farm, you know.'

'Ah!' says Nan. It would be cruel, to say there

is disappointment in her tone ; there is certainly lack of interest. Mrs. Canty, an old woman of ninety, who has had a leg and a half in the grave for the past eighteen months, is as nothing to her, and quite as little, indeed, to her aunt ; but, then, some change in the programme had to be made.

‘ Poor old thing !’ says Penelope kindly, who has seen her twice in her life.

‘ Well, she’s not expected to last the day,’ says Julia, persevering in her news as she sees that the late cloud is hardly yet dispersed. ‘ Ah ! here is Murphy,’ regarding that important person with a warlike glance, as he happens to enter the room with a note for Nan, which she slips hastily into her pocket. ‘ Murphy, did you hear to-day how Mrs. Canty is ? Poor old creature ! she has supplied me with butter and eggs for so many years that I feel quite an interest in her.’

‘ She was bad, ma’am, mortal bad, this morning,’ says Mr. Murphy, who for his part does feel an interest in the fading Mrs. Canty, her mother having been his mother’s third cousin’s niece—quite a close and easily got-at connection for an Irish peasant.

'If ye'd like to hear tell of her, Miss Nan, I wouldn't be wan minit takin' a skelp up there.'

He is evidently so anxious to go, that Nan has not the heart to tell him that dinner will soon be ready, and his services required.

'Well, go, and hurry back,' says she impressively.
'We shall be so unhappy till we hear.'

'Murphy is quite delighted now,' says Penelope, laughing as the old man disappears with great alacrity.
'He has the joyous prospect of a wake before him.'

Here the door opens, and William and Bartle enter the room.

CHAPTER IX.

' Thus Reason advises, but Reason's a fool,
And 'tis not the first time I have thought so.'

' HOW d'ye do,' says Bartle, his handsome face brightening into a smile as he sees his aunt. To tell the truth, she is not half so irritating to the boys as she is to the girls. Even William, who is gruff as a rule, treats her with affability. Perhaps, too, Bartle's charming face—so frank, so expressive, so like his dead mother's—appeals in quite a powerful way to his rich and selfish aunt. If she likes anyone on earth, it is Bartle, yet, strange to say, she herself is hardly aware of the strength of this liking.

' What a swell you are, Ju !' says he. This remark, and the familiar and youthful ' Ju,' so much better than the odious Julia, though perhaps not so graceful as the Frenchified Julie, delights Mrs. Manly. If

Bartle had been a studied courtier instead of the honest gentlemanly lad he is, he could hardly have made a more acceptable speech to his rich aunt. He would have been astonished, and I think horrified, had he ever known that it was the *raison d'être* of the five-pound note she gives him three days later.

'Oh ! I'm only pretty well,' says she, returning his boyish salute quite warmly for her, 'though it appears I don't please everybody'—with a sharp glance at Gladys, who sits immovable beneath it. 'Well, and how are you getting on with your studies? Up again next month for your exam., eh? William,' catching a nearer view of that unsatisfactory youth—'I really do wish, William, you would try to keep yourself even commonly clean. Your coat is a mass of dust. Surely you can afford yourself a moment or two to brush it.'

'You are wrong; he can afford himself nothing,' says Nan, laughing merrily. Their poverty has come to be regarded as a joke by all these happy, handsome children.

'Besides, he couldn't do it. He daren't, I assure

you,' says Bartle. 'One ordinary light infantry attack upon that coat of his would reduce it to powder. One common assault of the useful brush, and William would know it no more. My dearest Ju, take pity on it.'

Here there is a little rush through the huge, gaunt, grand, dilapidated hall outside, and Nolly and Henjy, rushing in, seek to precipitate themselves upon Mrs. Manly. But with a knowledge of their little ways born of a long experience she repulses them. Truly children are a wearying of the flesh, a worrying of good clothes.

'There, now, babies,' cries she, waving them off good-humouredly. 'Paws off! You may give me one little kiss, just one, on the forehead, if you will, but no more.'

Nan, who is standing behind her aunt, catches Penelope's eye, and Gladys catching hers and Penelope's, all three girls break into wild but secret mirth.

It would indeed be a thousand pities to destroy that artistic arrangement in red and white that adorns the fair Julia's cheeks. That little dab of

red—that effective softening of veloutine—who would be so brutal as to ruin the effect produced from such hours of labour? Truly a good maid is a pearl beyond price.

‘Have you lunched yet, girls?’ asks Mrs. Manly, who, naturally, is quite dead to the amusement her address to the children has created.

‘We haven’t dined yet,’ corrects Nan. ‘Why?’

‘Because I’m famished. I hadn’t half a second to get anything at home before starting, I was so anxious to pay you a visit on my way.’

‘Dinner will be ready in about ten minutes,’ says Nan, who knows it is already due, and that Mrs. Moriarty in the kitchen is fuming over the delay. But surely old Murphy must be given time to see the last of his mother’s third cousin’s, etc. ‘You can wait?’

‘Thanks, yes, dear. I really believe I had better. One gets positively nothing at Cashelmore. It is the most starving place in the world. Really, how that old woman has the face to invite people to her house, keep them there for hours on a biscuit or so, and send them back famishing to their own homes, passes

my comprehension.' This is a favourite declaration of Julia's. 'After all, Nan, I cannot help thinking you are wise in staying away.'

'It isn't yet too late for you to emulate my wisdom,' says Nan, making her a saucy little *moué*. 'Though it was hardly the fear of starvation that kept me from accepting that terrible card.' She points to a highly glazed and heavily emblazoned card, about the size of a small tray, that lies on a table near, and, indeed, half covers it.

'Yes, isn't it horrid?' says Mrs. Manly, looking askance at it.

'Stay at home, Julia,' says Penelope teasingly. 'I wouldn't go to such vulgar people if I were you.' She laughs delightedly at her own wit, which lies in the fact that in old Lady Cashelmore's withered veins runs the bluest blood in Ireland.

'Pish,' says Julia, laughing too. She is always quite good-humoured. 'Now I'm gowned, you see, I may as well go and see it out. And besides, as I told you, I am taking Boyle.'

'You didn't,' says Gladys; 'you said Boyle was taking you.'

'It's all the same,' says Mrs. Manly airily. 'Go I must in any case.'

'Poor Julia!' says Nan softly, shrugging her dainty shoulders.

Mrs. Manly, disliking her tone, turns abruptly to her.

'You're better,' says she sharply. 'You needn't go about calling yourself ill any more.'

'Did I go about calling myself that?' says Nan, opening her eyes. 'Heavens! what a worry I must have been to my friends! I had no idea that delirium lasted when once one was out of bed and able to walk. Why didn't you lock me up, Penelope? Just imagine my trotting all over the place, annoying everybody about my——'

'How absurd!' cries Gladys, bursting into a gay little laugh. 'But, after all, I think it is just as well you aren't going to Cashelmore to-day. I agree with Julia, it's a hungry place; I went there last month, and—— By-the-bye,' with a reproachful glance at Mrs. Manly, who meets it unmoved, 'they didn't think me too young. Well, never mind!' If this touch of saintly resignation is intended to soften her

aunt, it fails. That sturdy matron continues deaf to all blandishments. ‘Well,’ says Gladys, with a resounding sigh, ‘what I was going to say is, that when I was at Cashelmore last month I suffered dreadfully : I hadn’t eaten any dinner, and when I got there I could have devoured an ox. But there wasn’t one. Only cups—such cups—meant for eggs, I think, and only as much tea in them as would go into the corner of your eye. And after that one strawberry—one. Go there again ! Oh no, thank you. Not likely.’

‘Was there ever so greedy a little thing?’ cries Penelope, laughing.

‘Greedy ! I wasn’t greedy !’ returns Gladys, indignantly ; ‘I was only hungry. I’m hungry now, too. It’s——’ with a glance at the clock ; ‘why, Nan, dinner ought to have been ready half an hour ago.’

‘It is ready,’ says Nan ; ‘but we are waiting for Murphy.’

At this moment Mr. Murphy, opening the door, enters in a state of considerable excitement. He has evidently been running, and his short legs are shaking under him, from the unwonted excitement, and his brown old face is aglow.

‘ ‘Tis all right !’ declares he loudly, whilst yet afar off, filled, no doubt, with the benevolent desire to allay all fear of disappointment in his hearers. ‘ She’s dead sure enough, the crature ; dead as Julius Caysur —wid yer honour’s lave !’ making a slight respectful bow to Nan.

‘ Oh, I expect she is dead without that, poor soul !’ says Nan.

‘ What a way to announce a death !’ says Mrs. Manly, fixing her glasses on her nose and her eyes on Murphy. ‘ Has that man no sense of decency ? Leave the room, Murphy ! leave it instantly. You ought to be ashamed of yourself !’

‘ The dinner will be on the table in five minnits, Miss Nan,’ says Mr. Murphy, in a tone of great dignity, that is always reserved for state occasions. He declines altogether to notice Mrs. Manly or her order.

‘ Very well, Murphy,’ says Nan sweetly ; and, rising, she carries Julia upstairs to wash her hands and ‘ do her hair,’ as they say. Dinner at Rathmore is an early meal, followed by a late high tea.

‘ Julia, tell us about the dance,’ says Nan, as she

sits on the old worn-out armchair in her own room watching her aunt washing her hands. ‘Will *everybody* be there?’

‘The county!’ says Julia succinctly.

‘No!’ cries Nan, starting into active life. ‘It isn’t going to be an ordinary dance, then?’ Evidently Julia is about to surpass herself. Nan’s spirits rise to boiling-point.

‘Oh, how delicious!’ cries she. ‘I do hope it will be a fine night.’

‘It will,’ says Julia solemnly. ‘The weather is settled. There will be a moon; that is a great matter. I am giving it (one might imagine she meant the moon here, but in reality it is only the dance) for Boyle. That is, ostensibly; but I felt, too, that something was due to that man at Hume Castle. He is young, and has come amongst us for the first time. Notice should be taken of him. In fact, Nan,’ looking at her, ‘I am giving it for you.’

Nothing can exceed the gravity, the solemnity, with which this assertion is made.

‘Are your invitations out?’ asks Miss Delaney, turning on her sharply.

'No, not yet ; but to-morrow they will be.'

'Then put them in the fire,' says Nan, 'if, as you say, you are giving this dance with a view to my marriage with Mr. Hume. I don't care in the least for him. I certainly shan't marry him. He is all very well to talk with, to—to—' ('flirt with' is on the tip of her tongue, but happily she chokes it back) 'be friends with. But as for anything more——'

'You have your mind full of Boyle,' cries her aunt angrily, facing round from the basin-stand, whilst drying her hands in the towel with a vigour born of vexation of spirit. 'I do believe you fancy him. A fellow not worth a thought.'

'Whether he is or not, I do not give him one,' says Nan coldly. 'Yet he, too, is very well to talk with and to make a friend of.'

'You will never make a friend of either of those two men, if they are in love with you,' says her aunt vehemently. 'Don't flatter yourself.'

'Well, say I shall make them enemies ; what does it matter ?' says Nan with her usual careless shrug. 'Come, Julia, boiled mutton does not admit of dallying.'

CHAPTER X.

'She has beauty, but still you must keep your heart cool ;
She has wit, but you mustn't be caught so.'

THE early dinner, to which Julia did full justice, has come to an end before the arrival of Boyle Ffrench. When he does arrive, Penelope and Gladys are upstairs, with their aunt, seeing her through her final manœuvres before starting on her drive to Cashelmore, and only Nan is in the drawing-room below to receive him.

'So you're not going?' says he gloomily, sitting down opposite her, and pulling angrily at his moustache ; 'If I had known that a day earlier I shouldn't have gone, either. But just at the last it was impossible to disappoint Julie.'

He always calls her Julie, that graceful, sympathetic rendering of the coarse Julia, as Mrs. Manly puts it.

After all, it would be very foolish to annoy a woman who has it in her power to leave one three thousand a year.

‘Why?’ asks Nan, who is sufficiently cruel to create a difficulty for him, and more—sufficiently cruel to refuse to help him out of it. He is a handsome man. So handsome that all her people believe her to be secretly attached to him, yet in her heart she cares as little for him as for all the other admirers who have arisen time after time to swell her court.

‘Well, not impossible, perhaps, but at least impolite,’ says he, rather uneasy under her glance.

‘Or impolitic; that’s a better word,’ says Nan, with a malicious little laugh. Ffrench reddens angrily.

‘There is also another word,’ says he;—‘rude, for example.’

It is now Nan’s turn to grow angry.

‘How do you mean?’ asks she: ‘that I am rude, or that you would have been rude to disappoint Julia?’

‘You can put it any way you like,’ says he defiantly.

'Ah, you leave it to me because you are afraid to decide,' says Nan tauntingly. 'Well, what a coward you are!'

She plucks a rose from a vase near her, crumples it between her palms into an odorous ball, and throws it lightly into the air. The crushed petals, falling apart, descend in a shower upon her dainty head. She shakes them off petulantly, whilst casting a sidelong glance at Ffrench. Has she gone too far?

'I've spoiled that rose, at all events,' says she, with a view to breaking the silence which is growing oppressive.

'Oh, if that were all!' returns he. There is something in his voice that is so near to anguish that it touches her in spite of herself.

'What have I done now?' demands she warmly, standing back from him, and staring at him with a little frown.

'What you are always doing,' retorts he fiercely; 'making me as miserable as a man can well be.'

'Well, why submit to it? Why don't you stay away? You are always accusing me of this, that and the other thing, and still you come. Yes,' silencing

him by a slight gesture as she sees him about to expostulate. ‘It is all quite true; you love to come here and say rude things to me, and pretend afterwards that it was I who was cruel to you. Why, look at you now! One would think by your face that I had committed a murder or something. Really it is too much. You are more unkind to me than anyone I know.’

‘Is that true? Good heavens! what a thing to say to me! To me, who you know would lay down my life for you.’

‘Would you?’ with a contemptuous uplifting of her chin. ‘I don’t believe you would even offend Julia for me.’

‘I would; I won’t go to this abominable affair to-day, if that is what you mean.’

Unfortunately, it is exactly what she does mean; and therefore his mention of it is a fatal mistake. She had been annoyed by the fact that he, though she cares little or nothing for him, should have been found willing to go to an entertainment where he knew she was not to be. It seems like rank disrespect to this born coquette, whom men have taught to be their

tyrant, and who, indeed, have no one but themselves to thank for the despotism she practises towards them, that anyone should dare to seek pleasure in a spot where she is not. That Boyle has so dared has been a standing grievance with her since she heard of it ; but not even to herself would she acknowledge this, and now to hear him put it into words is more than she can bear.

‘ How should I mean that ?’ says she with cold displeasure. ‘ What reason have I given you to imagine that your going here or there could ever be a matter of moment to me ? And to displease Julia by staying here instead of going to Cashelmore would certainly not be to please me. By-the-bye,’ rising and making a movement towards the door, ‘ she seems to be forgetting that time is flying.’

‘ Don’t go like that,’ says Ffrench, getting before her, and placing his back against the door. ‘ What did I say, after all ? I was presumptuous enough perhaps to fancy that you—you might wish me to spend the afternoon with you instead of going to Cashelmore ; and if I was, is there no excuse for that ? Has there never been a time between us two when

you have desired my presence? Oh, Nan!' with sudden passion, 'I would to Heaven that I could think you ever desired it now.'

'Well, you evidently did just now,' says she uneasily. She has relinquished all hope of escaping by the door, and now casts a lingering glance at the window behind her, with a view to gaining the garden by it. This contemplated manœuvre is not lost upon Ffrench.

'If you want to go, why, you can,' says he bitterly, moving away from the door. 'But before you go I should like to ask you one thing.'

'Ask it, then,' says Miss Delaney with an assumption of indifference she is far from feeling. What on earth is he going to say now?

'And you will answer? Tell me, then, what it is that has come between us!' exclaims he, drawing so close to her that his angry eyes are now looking eagerly into hers.

'I really can't see that there is much between us,' says Nan with a rather nervous laugh. There is a double meaning in her words, but he is too intent upon the one thought that is troubling him to notice

it. ‘There,’ laying her hand upon his chest and giving him a little push backwards; ‘surely there is space enough in this room for both of us.’

‘You know what I mean,’ persists he. ‘But you refuse to answer. I can, however, do that for you. It is Hume who stands between us, who has induced you to——’

‘Take care,’ interrupts she lightly, but with a warning glance. ‘Don’t go so far that you can’t get back.’

‘Why should I not speak? Why should you not hear?’ cries he, his naturally violent temper now getting rather from under control. ‘Am I to sit silent eating my heart out whilst you——’

‘Now, I have spoken once,’ says she, interrupting him again. ‘Why will you go on with it? You are doing no good: you are only making yourself absurd, and for what? You know as well as I do that Mr. Hume is nothing at all to me. I don’t know’— indignantly—‘why I trouble myself to say all this to you; but you are so rude, so ill-tempered, that one is compelled to say things that never should be said.’

' Still——' begins he gloomily, and then breaks off. After a moment, ' Why do you encourage him, then ? ' demands he.

' But I don't,' says Nan, with charmingly uplifted brows of amazed dissent.

' Do you think I am blind ? ' says he.

' Well, supposing I do. Why should I not ? ' says she with a suspicion of amusement in her eyes, born perhaps of her sudden change of tactics. ' What harm can it do him ? '

' Him ! Let it harm him ! ' cries he fiercely. ' The question I would have you ask yourself is, what harm will it do me ? '

' Well,' says she, after a full minute spent in careful self-communion, if one is to judge by the rapt gaze she directs at the unresponsive ceiling, ' I've asked it : what's the next thing to be done ? '

' If you are determined to treat——'

' One thing I warn you about—if it's a riddle, I give it up,' says she gaily.

' Pshaw ! ' says Ffrench, turning on his heel, and in his turn making for the door. He has reached it, opened it, is almost beyond her wiles, when she makes

up her mind that he is not to carry away with him a disagreeable memory of her.

'Boyle,' cries she softly, 'stay one moment. There is no such need for haste, as Julia isn't to be married, and she has not made herself altogether lovely yet ; and see—do you know a grand discovery that I have made ? No ! Well, that you have no flower in your button-hole.'

'Never wear one. Hate 'em,' says Ffrench vindictively, yet so far re-enslaved already as to be unable to make another attempt at departure.

'You must in another moment,' says this wicked coquette, going quickly up to him, with lovely smiling lips, that refuse to remember unkind things said, and eyes that are smiling too. 'See what I have got for you.'

She holds out to him a delicate Dijon bud, a veritable 'last rose of summer,' that is scarcely more perfect in shape and hue than the hand that holds it.

'Come, come here,' commands she in her sweet imperious way. 'I want to pin it into your coat.'

'Oh, Nan,' says he, catching her hand, and pressing

it passionately to his lips. ‘If I only could believe in you ! but I don’t, I don’t !’

‘That’s rude again, but very sensible,’ says Miss Delaney with a merry little laugh. She pins in the flower slowly, cautiously, as if her reputation depends upon the management of it, and then looks straight up at him. ‘I’m a wretch ; and that’s the solemn truth,’ says she with an adorable self-condemnatory shake of her pretty head.

CHAPTER XI.

'She came—we saw—were conquered : one and all
We donned the fetters of delicious thrall.
We fetched, we carried, waited, doffed, and did
Just as our Blanche the beautiful would bid.'

FFRENCH'S subjection is only just completed as Mrs. Manly and the girls return to the drawing-room, and shortly afterwards the two bound for Cashelmore take their departure.

'Well, we shall have a dull afternoon of it,' says Penelope rather dolefully. 'Everybody will be there, and therefore we shall see nobody. Why on earth weren't we born rich ?'

'If we had been, I suppose somebody else would have had to take our place and be born poor,' says Nan. 'There is no use in worrying about it. We can't go to Cashelmore to-day, and so shall inevitably

be thrown upon our own resources, as not a soul will come to see us, so let us think of something to do to while away the time.'

'Did Julia leave any of that plum tart?' asks Gladys. 'I was afraid to look for fear she might have finished it; and if she had and saw me looking, it would have been awful!'

'I don't know; why?'

'Well, you spoke of whiling away the time. Eating that tart, if she did leave any, would be as good a way as another,' says Gladys innocently, who is still young enough to love 'sweeties.'

The other two girls laugh, and follow her to the dining-room, where they find Murphy taking away the things.

'Not so much left as one plum,' says Gladys, in high disgust, pointing to the empty dish where that good plum tart had once displayed itself. 'Well, I call it shameful! How she can eat so much! Well, there is one comfort: she is pretty certain to be ill, and—'

'Gladys!' says Nan, in a sharp tone of reproof. She might have gone on to give her younger sister a

lecture, but Mr. Murphy, breaking into the conversation, checks her.

'Fegs, Miss Gladys, ye needn't hope for that,' says he, bumping a glass dish down upon the sideboard with rather unnecessary force, doubtless with a view to relieving his feelings. 'The plums isn't grown that would overcome her. The ould lady is tougher nor you think. The Lord might turn her heart,' says Mr. Murphy, with heavy scepticism, 'but'—solemnly—'I'll tell ye this, miss, that the devil himself wouldn't turn her stomach !'

'Well, Murphy,' says Penelope mildly, when she has recovered breath after the shock caused by this astounding speech, 'I'll tell you something—that you are nothing if not graphic! Gladys! It is a pity to die before one's time.' This to Gladys, who is choking dangerously with suppressed laughter in the window.

She recovers at this altercation, however, and, turning, would perhaps have sought to vindicate herself from the charge of suicide, but that a loud double knock on the hall door, resounding through the house at this moment, brings everyone to a standstill.

‘Who can that be?’ says Nan, flushing, however, a rather conscious crimson.

‘It sounds like Mr. Hume’s knock,’ says Penelope. ‘But, if going at all, he ought to be at Cashelmore now.’

‘Murphy, go and see who it is,’ says Gladys, with all that commonsense that, as a rule, belongs to her.

They stand silently in a row, as Murphy’s feet clipper-clapper across the hall. They hear the door open, and a voice ring through it. It is beyond all dispute the voice of Hume.

‘Good gracious! What does he mean by this?’ says Nan, aghast.

‘Business!’ replies Penlope promptly. Here she gives way to mirth. ‘I say, Nan, it’s growing serious, isn’t it? You will have to make up your mind soon as to whether it is to be “yes” or “no.”’

‘Pouf!’ says Miss Delaney disdainfully. ‘That wouldn’t take me long. Not that he has the slightest intention of giving me the opportunity. Well, come; I suppose we shall have to see him.’

‘I don’t see why we need go in,’ says Gladys. ‘He

doesn't come to see us, and I want to finish that book——'

'I certainly shan't entertain him all by myself,' says Miss Delaney, seating herself in the nearest chair, with the evident intention of spending the remainder of her life there, unless they succumb to her wishes. 'He bores me more than any of you, and I don't see why I am to endure him unsupported. I won't, either. Murphy,' to that veteran, who has now returned after showing their visitor into the drawing-room, 'go and tell Mr. Hume that you made a mistake, and that we are all out, or ill, or dead.'

'Oh nonsense!' says Penelope, who is more nervous than the other two. 'If it comes to that, of course we shall all go in, but after awhile, Nan, I really do think you might carry him off to the garden and give Gladys and me a holiday.'

'Well, we'll see,' says Miss Delaney magnanimously, marching the conquered ones before her into Mr. Hume's presence.

'Fancy your coming to-day!' says Penelope, when they have all shaken hands and she sees that Nan

has made up her mind not to be the first to speak.
‘We quite thought that you were at Cashelmore.’

‘No, no; I never had the vaguest notion of going, once I heard you girls were not to be there,’ says Hume, who has seated himself on a most uncomfortable old chair, but who is looking as happy and pleasant as possible. ‘There was nothing to take me.’

‘I wish the old dowager could hear you,’ says Penelope, laughing. ‘But how did you know we were not going? Who told you?’

‘Miss Delaney,’ replies he. ‘You remember, eh?’ He looks at Nan, and that pretty creature all at once does remember an unguarded moment when she had, *en passant*, as it were, dropped a word in answer to another word of his, that told him of her decision not to be present at the fête at Cashelmore.

‘Oh, I see,’ says Penelope, casting a reproachful glance at the stricken Nan. But for her they would now be enjoying a long, silent, delicious afternoon amongst the scented haycocks. She is so far alive to the enormity of which she has been guilty, that she determines to carry off Mr. Hume, as soon as a suitable

opportunity presents itself, to the garden, thus leaving the others free to follow their own vagaries. It is a sort of reparation.

'Well, but why are you not going, really?' asks she, turning to Hume, and speaking as though she disbelieved, or treated as frivolous, his former excuse.

'I have told you,' returns he.

'That's nothing,' says she lightly. 'Merely the sort of thing one feels one ought to say, but not worth a thought. Why didn't you want to go?'

'Why didn't you?' says he.

'You ought to have been an Irishman,' retorts Miss Delaney with a saucy glance. 'A question as an answer to a question! You really should have had your birth in this distressful country.'

'I should have been your compatriot then—Well, I should have known compensation,' returns he. His glance at Nan becomes a decidedly prolonged one before he removes it, and lets it fall on the Cashelmore invitation card that happens to be at his elbow. 'And you had the courage to refuse this,' says he, taking it up between his finger and thumb,

as if a little afraid of it—as if under the impression that it may go off at any moment and blow them all to bits. ‘What an affair!’ says he; ‘what rascal painted it, I wonder? What pluck you must have to say no to such a mandate. Why didn’t you go, by-the-bye?’ says he.

‘We had neither clothes nor manners,’ answers Gladys solemnly, making a quotation that, emanating from a passing acquaintance, has been a family friend of theirs for some time. Penelope casts an indignant glance at her, but Nan, lying back in her chair, gives way to hearty laughter.

‘Oh, it is too much!’ cries she, her lovely mouth widened so that all her pearly teeth show through it.

‘I hope, Miss Gladys,’ begins Hume, who has caught the contagion from Nan, and is laughing too—‘I hope——’

‘You can call me Gladys,’ says she slowly, giving the permission with extreme severity.

‘Oh, thank you,’ says Hume, who is indeed obliged to her. To be able to call Nan’s sister by her Christian name without a prefix is to bring him somewhat nearer Nan. He pauses; he has evidently

forgotten what he has been about to say, and finally starts upon a novel topic altogether.

'Are any of you fond of sailing?' asks he.

'Sailing—in a yacht do you mean?' cries Nan, growing interested all at once, and bending towards him.

'Yes; in a yacht. The fact is, my sister at the last moment has disappointed me, and so, as I don't feel equal to the entertaining of women without her, I have refrained from inviting anyone to Hume for the shooting this year. I dare say,' smiling, 'I shall get together sufficient local talent to keep down the birds; William, for example!' Here they all laugh gaily, willingly, as youth must. 'But it occurred to me that this is a nice coast enough for cruising purposes, so I have had my yacht sent round.'

'Where? To Glandore?' asks Penelope, naming an ideally lovely village (situated about a mile or so from Rossmoyne) with a harbour, exquisitely framed on all sides by high hills, and foliage drooping to the water's edge.

'Yes, Glandore.'

'How lovely!' cries Nan, with such genuine joy,

with such unbounded belief in his willingness to make this yacht of his a source of amusement to her, that Hume's heart grows light with hope. 'If there is one thing on earth I really do like, it is yachting.'

A soft sigh (that is almost a moan), coming from Penelope, falls like a snowflake upon the general summer of content.

'How can anyone like the sea?' says she, in the forlorn tone that has always something in it of the sea-sick one.

'How can anyone not like it?' cries Nan with enthusiasm. 'Gladys, you like it—eh?'

But Gladys is not here to answer. Taking advantage of the late discussion, she has faded out of the room, and made a dash for the beloved book and solitude.

'Where is Gladys?' says Penelope, who, however, had seen her go. She rises: surely her own opportunity has now arisen. 'I'll find her,' says she, with a kindly word to Hume, who devoutly hopes she won't, and a sapient nod to Nan, meant to intimate the fact that when she goes she won't return. Nan, still feeling guilty with regard to that admission of hers about her

determination not to go to Cashelmore, gives her sister an answering glance that absolves her from further attendance.

'Well, I'm glad I thought of getting round the yacht,' says Hume; 'I had no idea you were fond of sailing, or I'd have had her here long ago.'

'You are very good,' says Miss Delaney demurely. She casts a half-glance at him, and a little smile, born half of nervousness, half of genuine amusement, curls the corners of her lips.

'I amuse you?' says Hume, changing his seat to one that brings him close to her. His tone has a question in it.

'Oh no!' says Nan, a little startled, but in spite of herself she now laughs. 'You mustn't think it was that.'

'That? What?'

'That I was laughing at you. Only it seemed so absurd that you should—— After all,' breaking off rather confusedly, 'I don't know why I was amused. It was—it could have been at nothing.'

'It was because I told you I should have brought the yacht here for your special enjoyment. But why

should that surprise you? Surely by this time you must know that there is hardly anything I wouldn't do for you.' He says all this quite evenly, as though it is the most usual thing in the world for a young man to declare open love to a girl after the acquaintance of a week or so.

' You do know it, don't you ?' says he. Her hand is lying on her lap, and lightly, in the most natural way in the world, he puts out his, takes her captive, and holds it softly. He does not press it, merely holds it, and with his other hand strokes it gently.

At first Nan, as though too surprised, makes no rejoinder, but presently she grows restive.

' Well, there is one thing—I don't want to know,' says she decisively, disengaging her hand from his. No rebuke falls from her lips, however, and she even smiles kindly at him as she makes her unkind speech. It is a little trick of hers to give with her sting an antidote. To hopelessly offend one of her slaves is beyond her. To feel that she had turned them adrift, that they would no longer think of her with tenderness, that she would cease to be in their eyes the one good thing on earth—impossible !

'I am afraid you will have to know,' says Hume, who has risen too, and is regarding her with that steady gaze that has already become familiar to her.

'I shan't,' says she perversely, stepping back from him, and giving him a defiant little nod. 'Now, now,' seeing he is about to speak, 'not a word more. Come into the garden; it is cooler out there, and one tires of the house; but remember,' with an imperious gesture, 'I forbid you to say another word on—on that subject. You promise?'

'For to-day, yes,' returns he steadily.

CHAPTER XII.

'Let us drink, for my song, growing graver and graver,
To subjects too solemn insensibly tends.'

'WELL, after all, Pen, and in spite of that dingy gown, I must say you look lovely,' says Nan—'just twice as lovely as I do.' She makes this naïve admission in quite a delighted tone, standing back from the old cheval glass the better to admire her sister. It is the night of Julia's dance, and the two Delaney girls, prinked out in all their best, are at that stage of their toilettes when it only wants a delicate pull here or an artistic touch there to complete them.

'Stand back a bit, Pen. Do you know,' in a tone of heartfelt thankfulness, 'your frock doesn't look half as bad as I thought it would. Here,' lifting her lovely snowy arms, still innocent of gloves, and slipping something from her neck, 'you shall wear

this—my pearl necklace. Yes, you must—you shall. It will give a freshness to your gown, and mine wants nothing.'

'Oh, Nan, now! And you know you love that necklace.'

'Well, I can love it again to-morrow. And see here, this ribbon—just at your side—there! You can't think how well it looks! you really wanted that. And now these gloves—'

She presses into Penelope's hands a pair of long white Suèdes that for many weeks have been her admiration, and which she has kept hidden away carefully in silver paper in hiding for any such lucky thing as a dance proper. It had indeed been rather a pull upon her slender resources to buy them at all.

Penelope almost flings them back, yet with a care that bespeaks her appreciation of them.

'You needn't think I'll take those,' she says with a stern air. 'I wonder you don't take off your frock and deck me out in that, too. No; nothing shall induce me to deprive you of them.'

'I shall,' says Nan, laughing. 'Do you know I feel right down selfish at wearing a new gown when you

haven't one? Here take them, Pen, if only to soothe my conscience. Now stand there and look at yourself in the glass. I say, Gladys'—to her sister, who has just entered—‘ doesn't Pen look nice ?’

‘ You both do—both,’ cries Gladys, with effusion. ‘ Oh, Penny, you are a regular duck! And no one, unless a regular prying beast, would notice the creases. Besides, after all, one can't have a new gown for every occasion, and, let me see, you have only worn that one six times. Seven, was it? It's all the same. Nan! You have given her your ribbon, and your gloves—and, oh! the necklace! Well, I must say you are good! And really, you know’—with a view perhaps to rewarding Nan for her generosity—‘ you don't want it: your gown is perfect, and altogether you look just like a nice happy dream !’

‘ Not another word,’ cries Nan gaily; ‘ you couldn't beat that if you were to try until to-morrow. I shall be fortunate indeed if I get such another compliment to-night.’

‘ Oh! what lucky girls you are, you two!’ cries poor Gladys with a groan, subsiding into a chair. ‘ To think that that old wretch would not let me go! And

I shouldn't have been asked to dance or anything. I shouldn't have been in the way at all. I only wanted to sit in a corner somewhere and watch you all. Oh!' wriggling on her chair, 'I should like to hurt her. I should like'—revengefully—'to pull her hair!'

'That wouldn't hurt her,' says Nan, at which they all laugh.

'At all events, I hope you will remember everything, and what was for supper, and what your partners said to you, and how everybody was dressed, and if she had that cream she had last time, and the name of the new waltz; and, whatever you do, don't lose your card,' says Gladys all in one breath. 'I shall so want to know who you danced with. Last time Nan lost hers.'

'On purpose,' says Penelope mischievously. 'She danced so often with Boyle that she was ashamed to show it.'

'It will be Mr. Hume to-night,' says Gladys. 'Oh, Nancy Bell, what a fickle thing you are!'

'It is all one to me,' says Miss Delaney, with a saucy shake of her charming head. 'Whoever dances best will win the day, so they had better look to

their ways. We shall be late, however, if we stand chattering here any longer. Is Bartle ready ?'

' He should be by this time, but I have had such a time with him,' says Gladys. ' Father's coat was well enough, but we had great trouble, William and I, bracing up the trousers ; however, I don't think they will be noticed much. And William says he looks splendid. Oh ! here he is. Come in, Bartle. I was telling them about the trousers. A bit long, eh ?' pushing him towards the two elder sisters, who have now assumed a grave air of judicial inquiry. ' But if the braces hold'—doubtfully—' they'll do.'

' For heaven's sake, Bartle, if you hear anything give, make for the door or the nearest window,' says Nan. ' Don't stop to think, or to find out ; fling yourself through any opening that will take you out of sight.'

' I've tied him up as tight as a drum,' says William, who is plainly lost in admiration of Bartle's appearance. ' There isn't a bit of fear. Did you ever see anything so good as the shirt—not a hole in it, and it very nearly fits him ; give him a year or two in which to swell out, like father, and it will be the very thing for him.'

'Swell out like father! Go to the mischief,' says Bartle indignantly. 'And do you think a shirt lasts for ever?'

'This one has—very nearly!' says Gladys. 'Bless me, to think of father having once worn that, and evening clothes and all! It does sound funny, doesn't it?'

'Perhaps he danced!' says Penelope, in an awe-stricken tone.

'And laughed,' says Nan.

'And flirted ——!' says Gladys, though I am bound to say in rather a frightened tone: it is, as she had secretly felt, too much.

'Hang it all! you don't want us to believe that, do you?' says Bartle, with a frowning brow.

His temper has got rather the better of him, indeed, so great is his trepidation as to whether he looks presentable or otherwise. It is his first appearance as his sister's chaperon at any large assembly, and the due importance of the occasion is eating into him. The depth of a lad's *amour propre* is hardly to be sounded, and Bartle's depth is deep indeed.

'I wouldn't mind anything but those Leslie girls,'

says he, appealing unconsciously to Nan. ‘They are always on the grin, and they’d see at once if a fellow was not up to the mark.’ All the *mauvaise honte* of his seventeen years shine forth here. ‘And there’s my dancing,’ he says nervously; ‘what am I to do about that? Cissy, the big one, is sure to make fun out of that.’

‘Ask her to dance,’ says Nan, with decision, ‘first thing, before she has seen you dancing with anyone else, and take her round and round, and round the room’—here Nan grows positively diabolical—‘without giving her time to breathe. Don’t mind a knock or two (one must get knocked about in this world, you know), and it will do her all the good in the world and take the “grin” out of her.’

‘Besides, Bartle, you know very well that you can dance the polka as well as anyone,’ says Penelope; ‘ask her for that.’

‘Oh, as for that,’ says Bartle, ‘I could get through every dance—respectably, at all events—if it wasn’t for that beastly music. That puts me out! Why people can’t dance without a confounded tum-tum-tum astonishes me.’

'I'm afraid you will have to put up with it,' says Nan, who is laughing gaily; 'here, put your arm round my waist and try once more.'

'I can't think how he is so dead to music when all the rest of us love it,' says Penelope.

'A bad sign of him,' cries Gladys, who is a great reader in spite of her youth, and whose darling Shakespeare is. Here she quotes a well-known passage from her favourite author that describes Bartle as a person of low character (not to say dangerous), fit only for treasons, stratagems, and spoils—

"The motions of his spirit are dull as night,
And his affections dark as Erebus.
Let no such man be trusted."

I'm sure I'm sorry for you, Bartle,' says she, with a mournful shake of her head.

'But Bartle isn't a man, the quotation doesn't apply,' says Penelope, who is busy retying his tie. Her intention is a kindly one, yet it is plain to all that she has offended him far more deeply than has the censorious Gladys. Better be a double-dyed villain than no man—at least, when one is seventeen. Bartle with an indignant jerk drags the long-suffering

tie out of her fingers and prepares once more to massacre it himself.

'I can do it,' says Nan, 'if you will let me stand behind you—so.' The deed is done.

'Now,' says he, 'Nan, one turn, just to get me into it. Gladys, sing a polka. Ah, that's it. One, two, three; one, two, three,' he counts out loud, at the very top of his fresh young voice, as he revolves round and round.

'But, Bartle, you mustn't do that,' says Penelope in a tone of horror. 'Don't count. You can't in a public ball-room. You will be——'

'Let him alone,' cries Nan, who is breathless with laughter. 'Cissy Leslie will be delighted with him. And now come along.'

She flings a pretty white shawl round her as she speaks, gives a hasty if warm kiss to Gladys, and runs down the stairs, the others following.

CHAPTER XIII.

' Fair Amy of the terraced house,
 Assist me to discover
Why you, who would not hurt a mouse,
 Can torture so a lover ?'

MRS. MANLY was right in her prognostication : there is a moon—a moon as perfect as though it had been bought and paid for, warranted to last for eight hours, and to turn on at any moment.

Its cold but silvery beams pour down upon the square, gaunt, old house and grounds of Ballybrack, bathing everything it touches in an ethereal beauty.

It is now long past midnight, and the dance is at its height. It has indeed reached that safe hour when Mrs. Manly, in an exquisite gown and the very gayest of spirits, can safely congratulate herself on the fact of its being an unqualified success. Old Lady Cashel-

more had put in an appearance, a rather exceptional thing for her to do, as she never stirs abroad, and had brought her grandson, Lord Cashelmore, a tall, slender, grave young man, with her. She had brought also the last London beauty, who, in a remarkably smart gown, and with manners that would have disgraced a milkmaid, had flirted and danced and supped uproariously.

The old lady, having been mildly informed by her grandson that her third slumber had been accompanied by snores, had carried herself off about twelve o'clock, leaving Beauty behind her. That lively damsel had declined to stir, feeling herself very well entertained by the country gentlemen present, who, very nearly to a man, go down before her.

Everything, therefore, so far has gone off remarkably well. If the county had bowed before Beauty's shrine, the military had succumbed to the charms of her nieces. Penelope is looking quite lovely, and Nan charming. With a sigh of joyful anticipation Mrs. Manly tells herself that Mr. Hume's open, and indeed obstinate, attention to the latter can have only one meaning. And what a match! What a settlement!

What a rise in the world for this old family tottering on the very verge of ruin!

There is anxiety, however, mingled with her triumph. That Boyle, whose temper is never to be depended on, is now only seeking an opportunity to give way to an outburst of that anger that has been consuming him for hours past is patent to her. There is something about the pale, drawn, feverish face of the young man that renders her as nervous as indignant.

Good heavens! what a thing it is to have to look after such a girl as Nan—such an abominable coquette, not caring how she pains or how she distracts that unhappy one who is bound to see to her welfare. Mrs. Manly by this time has fully persuaded herself that she is the unhappy one on this occasion. She might not perhaps have been thus persuaded by her conscience (which is an elastic one) if Mr. Hume, with his handsome rent-roll, had not dropped into her life, and shown so decided a preference for her pretty niece.

And that Boyle should interfere—should elect, perhaps, to spoil this perfect scheme of hers! That

there had been a quarrel between him and Nan early in the evening, she had by chance discovered, and that he is by this time enraged by a jealousy that has Hume for its reason is also known to her. Hume, indeed, has made himself decidedly conspicuous. In vain has the Beauty turned her large inviting eyes upon him. He has danced with Nan, and Nan alone. In such intervals as when that much-desired person is claimed by another partner, he props himself against the nearest friendly wall, and stands there rigid until he can go to her again.

It is an undeniable infatuation. He laughs at it even to himself, but never for a moment is he contemptuous of it. Certainly it is amusing. That he should have reached his thirtieth year—that he should have escaped the machinations of a hundred dowagers, the wiles of a hundred maidens in their first and second seasons—to come down to this remote Irish village and fall a victim to a simple Irish maiden ! Yes ! there is truly the element of surprise in all this, but with it a keen delight.

Whenever this knowledge grows within him—and that is often—this new, sweet knowledge that he is

irrevocably and for the first time in love, he is conscious of a rapturous thrill, born of honest joy in that his hour has come. His fate has surely overtaken him at last, but his ingenuous astonishment at this discovery is clouded by no regret.

A doubt that Nan loves him is ever present with him; a doubt that he shall eventually marry her—never! Upon this termination of his courtship he has set his soul, and being an Englishman, and therefore a trifle dogged, it would be a strong man who could now turn him from his purpose. This child, this girl whose life has been bounded by the narrow, dull, conventional laws that distinguish the society of most small country places—who knows nothing of the big world beyond, of which he is essentially a citizen—has made her own of him, a hopeless captive to her bow and spear.

Looking at her now, as she dances past him in the arms of a cavalry man (who is plainly capable of holding a very lively conversation with his partner, without any danger to life or limb, whilst waltzing with a subtlety hardly to be surpassed), he tells himself that surely Nature never produced a fairer

face than hers. A face all light and gladness, a face that has known love, and fondest care, and tenderest affection, but never grief or sadness. A saucy, merry, capricious, mischievous face, and careless to a degree, but surely capable of a tenderness that might be called passionate, once her heart awakes. Who is to waken it? Watching her still, as she now stands at the opposite side of the room, he asks himself this question to the disquiet of his soul.

'I'm sure I don't wonder at your staring at her,' says Bartle, who has come to anchor beside him, flushed and triumphant after his last mad prance round the room. 'Such a figure! Why on earth don't she stay at home, if she can't succeed in making herself look decenter than that?'

'Eh?' says Mr. Hume, in a tone that would have made any youngster jump except a Delaney.

'You're like old Leslie,' says Bartle, exploding. 'Your fancy is for an armful. Well, you've only got to ask her to dance, and you'll be happy for ever.'

'Who on earth are you talking about?' asks Hume, calming down.

'One would think you couldn't see her,' says Bartle. 'When fellows talk of "shooting a haystack flying," I always think of Miss O'Connor.'

'Oh! Miss O'Connor,' says Hume, growing restless and absent as he sees Nan moving away. 'Was she the object of your admiration? Yes, I see her now; she was close to your sister, eh? Well, you are right: there is enough of her in all conscience.'

'Enough, and no waist,' says Bartle, with a grin at his own wit, which, however, is thrown away upon Hume, who is now valiantly fighting his way towards that door through which he saw Nan disappear.

He only finds her in time to see Ffrench, advancing towards her from another direction. There is something strained about the young man's face, that is suggestive of extreme mental disturbance, badly subdued. Miss Delaney, after a swift upward glance that alights on Ffrench's face, and gives her warning of his approach, and of his mood too, bestows upon her late partner a little nod of dismissal, and settles herself in her seat, as if to receive Boyle's charge with becoming dignity.

That young man marches upon his fate with a

courage that savours of despair, and of a good deal of temper too.

‘Are you engaged for this?’ asks he in a tone that breathes of wrath as yet unconquered.

‘No,’ returns Nan sweetly.

‘May I have the pleasure——?’

‘No’—quite as sweetly, but with steadiness that should have given him wisdom. But where is the fool that can equal the fool in love?

‘Why?’ calmly, yet with boiling rage, that is trebled because of the fact that Hume is near and can hear all that is being said. ‘Have I offended you?’

‘No,’ says Nan again, with the gentlest shake of her head.

‘Then why refuse me?’ demands he, with ill-repressed fury. ‘Surely you can say something besides “No.” How have I annoyed you?’

‘I have not accused you,’ says she, still gently, but now coldly.

‘But you decline to dance with me. That is a direct insult,’ says Ffrench, whose unhappy temper has now broken loose.

‘Mr. Hume,’ says Nan, rising, and turning two

lovely smiling eyes on Hume, 'I am tired. I have not seen the gardens yet, and they tell me they are charming. Will you take me to them ?'

There is not a touch of agitation in either her face or manner. She has turned to Hume, and away from Ffrench, as though the latter no longer existed.

'Certainly !' says Hume, a little gravely. That the girl has been cruel it would be impossible to deny. He gives her his arm silently, and Ffrench, after a slight swaying of his body in her direction, and a gesture as if about to speak, turns abruptly on his heel, and with a face as white as death strides away.

CHAPTER XIV.

“Tis hard to feel one’s self a fool !

OUTSIDE there is a silence that contrasts most kindly with the loud, if cultured, din within. Here it is scarcely loud indeed, being broken by distance, and ever and ever, as they move farther from it, it grows more feeble. In the intensity of the sweet calm that covers the garden they by degrees lose sense of it, and though the glow of the many lamps still streams outwards, and lays broad ribbons across their path, the human voice grows still, or almost so ; now and again, indeed, it comes to them, not distinctly, but as it were the clear, tinkling, never-ceasing, and liquid music of well-water dropping between the chinks of limestone.

By-and-by they get past even this quaint, vague murmur, and find themselves within a quaint old garden, where flowers of autumn growth hold sway.

Tall, stately hollyhocks of every colour, every hue, stand upright, as if in haughty discontent at being brought into such close proximity with the flowers of lowlier growth below. So fair, so straight they stand, that involuntarily Hume and Miss Delaney stop short to look at them.

There is grass all round them in this old-world spot into which they have wandered—a region of green, unbroken save for the glimpses of god or goddess here and there, whose naked limbs gleam white in the moonbeams.

Such beams! So clear, so cold, so pure—a very sigh from heaven. Broadcast they fling themselves to-night upon this poor smirched earth, as though in very pity for it; as though with a longing, heaven-born, to cleanse it from its stains. Through the arching trees, on the hollyhocks, across the path which Hume and Nan are treading, fall these heavenly rays, brightening as they pass.

‘They burnish steel to silver bright—a mirror for an angel meet;
They bridge it with a bridge of light—fit pathway for an angel’s feet,
If angel feet and angel face haunt mortal creatures’ dwelling-place.

' You are like one of those flowers,' says Hume abruptly. He has been looking at the hollyhocks abstractedly for some time, and perhaps this idea has entered into him half unconsciously.

' Oh, I hope not,' says Nan quietly ; ' I don't like hollyhocks. They are not as the other flowers are—not homely, or lovable, or sweet. They are too tall, too majestic, too severe. If they wore human garb, I should be afraid of them, I think.'

' Is not that another resemblance,' says Hume. ' Do you never inspire fear ?'

' Never. Never indeed. I defy you to show me the person who has ever been awed by me.'

' Behold one at least,' says Hume, laying his hand upon his heart with a pretence at burlesque that fails to hide his real meaning. ' Am I not afraid of you ?'

He laughs as he says this, and she laughs too, but half-heartedly—rather with a tone of scorn, as though men were insects difficult to be classed.

' Afraid of me,' she says. ' Why, look at me. Look hard !' coming a little nearer to him, and uplifting her face in the moonshine. ' Now tell me what there is to be frightened about.'

As I have said, she has stepped more fully into the moonbeams ; they beat upon her perfect face, her snowy neck, her lissom figure, clad in its white gown : they give an added lustre to her large luminous eyes.

‘A great deal,’ replies Hume in a low tone. He pauses, as if unable to go on, but then adds, ‘Shall I tell you ?’

Something in his manner perhaps unnerves her.

‘Oh no,’ cries she quickly. ‘If you think I have faults, why—keep them to yourself. Already you have called me an ogre. That is sufficient for one day, surely.’

‘An ogre ! A hollyhock !’ corrects he reproachfully.

‘Well, it is all the same,’ says Miss Delaney, most unreasonably it must be admitted.

‘Nan,’ says he quickly, ‘sit down here ; I want to talk to you.’

They have come now to a garden seat of liberal dimensions. It has been placed in a secluded way where the moonbeams no longer find a home, and, entering thus into the cool sweet dark, a feeling of rest falls upon Hume. If she would but listen to him here !

‘I’m cold,’ says Miss Delaney promptly, who,

though a simple Irish maiden, isolated from the London world, and without much knowledge of what should and should not be said, is still quite alive to the fact that a man is in love with her. ‘I think I should like to go into the house.’

‘Not for a moment. It is lovely here; still——’ says Hume. ‘And——’ He pauses. He had been about to say plainly, ‘I love you,’ but all at once it seems to him that the first thing to be discovered is whether she loves Ffrench. Doubts of her dealing with that ill-tempered young man now enter into him.

‘Well?’ says she. She has seated herself on the garden chair, and has pulled her skirts aside so as to make room for him. ‘You want to say something, so say it.’

‘It is this,’ says he, as if driven to it: ‘I think you were unkind to Ffrench just now—just before we came out.’

‘Was I?’ says she.

‘That you can be unkind, I know,’ continues Hume, who is, however, hardly inconsolable about the discomfiture of Ffrench.

‘Who? I?’ exclaims Nan, with wide-open eyes

of innocent reproach. ‘Just shows how much you know about it! You ask Penelope, and she’ll tell you that if there is a good-natured person on earth it is——’

‘Penelope?’

‘No, indeed—Nan.’

‘Your sister,’ says Mr. Hume carefully, ‘is quite the loveliest girl in the world, save one, but I am afraid as an arbiter in this case she would count as nobody.’

Nan laughs.

‘Wait till I tell her what you have said,’ exclaims she, casting a would-be threatening glance at him from under her long lashes. ‘A nobody, poor Pen! to be called a nobody, and by——’

‘A nobody, too,’ says Hume, with a slight smile. ‘Was that what you were going to say when you made that eloquent pause? After all, I was right, you see; you can be cruel.’

‘But not to Mr. Ffrench,’ quickly.

‘Oh, beyond question, to him.’

‘But why, why?’ asks she, with that pretty impatience that characterizes her. ‘Because I denied him that dance?’

'Why did you refuse him?' asks Hume, suddenly bending a little forward to get a better glimpse of her face.

'Why should I not? Have I not been dancing with him all my life? And as Julia is always impressing upon me, it is bad form to dance too often with one person. By-the-bye,' with a direct and malicious glance at him that, perhaps, is born of a desire to punish him for his pertinacity, and that suspicion of correction that lurks in his tone, 'that reminds me; I have danced far too often with you. I must not dance with you again to-night.'

'That is all in your own hands, of course,' says Hume. 'I might remind you, however, that there are still two dances belonging to me upon your card, and that a promise is a sacred thing. But I have lived sufficiently long enough to know that a woman's privileges are not bounded by earthly laws.'

'You mean that women are without principle,' says she, 'and destitute of conscience. But you are wrong there. Your vigorous defence of Boyle has opened my eyes to my iniquity towards him. Come, let us

go in, that I may find him, and make it up to him for my unkindness, that I feel now, because of your kindly hint, was barbarous.'

She rises as she speaks ; and Hume, of course, rises too, full of a consciousness that he has said rather more than was slightly needful. To see her make it up to Ffrench is about the last thing he really desires. Far better it would suit him to see the little rift this night has established widen into an impassable gulf. Something in the girl's face, however, that is half mocking, half resentful, forbids him to pursue the matter further.

'Are you in earnest,' asks he, 'about those waltzes ? Do you really intend to take them back ?'

'Certainly,' with a provoking nod of her head ; 'they will come in very usefully just now. I shall pass them on to that poor ill-treated Boyle, and make friends with him through their medium, I trust.'

Hume laughs, but rather curiously.

'So you are going to give my dances to Ffrench,' says he. 'I have pleaded his cause with a vengeance —to myself, I must say !'

'You have been very kind, very thoughtful, very

considerate—for dear Boyle,' says Miss Delaney demurely. 'I have hardly thanked you yet for showing me my duty so clearly.'

'Oh, don't mention it,' says Hume, with a light wave of the hand. 'I'm delighted if I've been of any use to you, but on the whole I should perhaps be even more delighted if I hadn't been.' He pauses, and then, as if with a last lingering remnant of hope: 'So you won't dance again with me to-night?'

'Oh no,' sweetly. 'Don't you see, I really couldn't—having once taken to heart your admirable advice, your waltzes will be the very things to set me right with that injured Boyle.'

'At that rate I may as well bid you good-bye for the present, before we go in,' says Hume ruefully.

'What nonsense!' says she, a little quickly and with an evanescent frown. 'One would think there was no other girl in the room to dance with?'

'Well—there isn't,' says he.

* * * * *

One of his waltzes—those waltzes so treacherously stolen back from him—is already in full swing as they reach the ball-room. Not everybody, however, is

taking advantage of the excellent music that is ringing through the room from behind a monstrous bank of ferns. Captain Ffrench, with gloom written in huge letters on his brow, is leaning against one of the doorways, glowering at each passing couple. He is, indeed, so far gone in melancholy that a tall gawky young man—one of the Leslies of The Point family who have never yet learned to mind their own business—stepping up to him, proceeds to rouse him from his gruesome reverie by a resounding slap on his shoulder.

‘What ails ye, man, eh?’ asks this artless son of Erin. ‘Pon me conscience, ’tis like a tombstone you are, propped up against that wall, with never a kick in you. Why don’t you dance, eh?’

‘Why don’t you?’ says Ffrench savagely; ‘give you something to do, and put a stop to your infernal——’

Providentially, at this moment Nan lays her hand upon his arm.

‘Shall I give you something to do too?’ says she, smiling as unconcernedly as though she had not gone through a pitched battle with him in the early part of the evening. ‘Shall we trip it?’ she laughs airily, and, as if quite aware that he will be unable to resist her,

slips her hand through his arm. ‘Mr. Hume,’ says she, casting a glance over her shoulder at Hume, who returns it grimly, ‘has brought me back from the garden just in time to let me make you a present of this waltz.’

CHAPTER XV.

'This old velvet coat has grown queer, I admit,
And changed is the colour and loose is the fit ;
Though to beauty it certainly cannot aspire,
'Tis a cosy old coat for a seat by the fire.'

* * * *

'NAN ! Nan ! I say, Nancy Bell ! Where on earth
is that girl ? Murphy, where's Miss Nan ? Nancy !'
calls Penelope again, with an angry upraising of her
voice on the last syllable. 'Moriarty,' to cook, who
has just put in her nose—a gigantic one with a
bulbous termination to it, that, to say the least of it,
is suspicious—'did you see Miss Nan anywhere ?
Murphy,' contemptuously, 'never sees anything that
isn't right under his nose.'

As Mrs. Moriarty would find a difficulty in seeing
anything that is under her nose, the shelter afforded

by the overhanging tip of that generous organ being large enough to hide anyone from her eagle eye, it would seem that Penelope has selected two of the worst people in Europe to help her in her search for Nan.

'Oh, bother her!' cries she, with an impatient little stamp. 'She is always disappearing like this just when one wants her. Where can she be?'

'Anybody but a born idiot would know,' says William the Gruff, emerging from the dining-room on the left, and speaking with that charming freedom of speech for which brothers when addressing their sisters are distinguished all the world over.

'Well, I don't,' says Penelope. 'Consider me an idiot born for the nonce, and take pity on my simplicity. Where is Nan?'

'In the summer-house, of course, with either Huime or Boyle. She's always there. Disgusting, I call it,' says William, with high emphasis. 'Why can't she make up her mind to one or the other of 'em?'

'Why, indeed,' says Penelope, as though struck by this argument.

'Oh, you needn't talk,' says William, unappeased by

this bowing to his wisdom. ‘ You’re as bad as her, every bit. Jack Leslie, or Fred Croker, you don’t care which it is, so long as you have one of them, and then it’s oh ! for the summer-house with you, too ! ’

‘ You’re very young. One is bound to pass over your rudeness,’ says Penelope, with a withering glance. ‘ And as for Nan, I don’t believe she is there at all. No one saw either Boyle or Mr. Hume coming.’

‘ Yes, I did,’ says Gladys, who has come out of the old schoolroom. ‘ See here, Pen :’ she catches her sister by the arm, and draws her backwards into the safe retreat from which she has just emerged. ‘ It is Mr. Hume,’ in an eloquent tone, low but full of meaning. ‘ As sure as you’re there he is now—eh ? ’

‘ No ! Do you think so ? ’ says Penelope, as if awestricken.

‘ I do. Wait and—you’ll see ! ’ with a nod that would not have disgraced a Delphic priestess.

‘ See what ? ’ asks somebody, and the two conspirators, looking round sharply, lo ! there is Nan herself standing in the doorway, fresh and bright, and as *insouciant* as if lovers were an unknown quantity in this troublesome world.

Gladys runs to her and drags her further into the room, and shuts the door with careful force.

'Well, well,' says she.

'Well, what?' asks Nan.

'Did he? Oh, now, Nan, you know.'

'Indeed I don't,' growing somewhat indignant.

'Did he propose?' says Penelope in a voice that is little short of tragic.

'What folly! What rubbish! Of course not,' cries Nan. 'A man I have only known three weeks or so! I really do think you girls are the silliest geese in Christendom.'

'It was Mr. Hume?' asks Penelope, as if still uncertain.

'Yes. He came down this morning, because he said he would be out sailing all the afternoon with Fred Croker, and he asked if he might drop in again in the evening with Fred,' says Miss Delaney, taking a careful eye to Penelope's approval of this proceeding, 'so I said yes, and—I asked them to supper.'

'Supper! Oh, Nan,' cry both the girls simultaneously. To entertain anyone in this old barrack

of a house with funds so limited would be an undertaking indeed ; but Mr. Hume !

‘ Well, I couldn’t get out of it,’ says Nan, who in truth looks rather frightened at her own temerity. ‘ He as good as asked me to ask him, and what could I do ? We must only set our wits to work and do the best we can.’

‘ There are chickens,’ says Penelope faintly.

‘ And lots of lettuce,’ says Gladys stoutly, who indeed is hard to daunt.

‘ And we might boil a ham, now, at once, so as to have it cold. Yes, we’ll manage it,’ says Nan, growing joyous again, as she sees the others fall in with her plan. Indeed, Nan is a mixture of Gladys and Penelope, and a right good mixture too ! Though I honestly confess that there are occasions when, before being taken seriously, she ought to be thoroughly well shaken. ‘ Oh, here’s Murphy—Murphy,’ as that worthy enters. ‘ Mr. Hume is going sailing, and says he will be here to-night for supper, so you must help me to get things nice for him.’

‘ To supper is it ? To supper here ! Glory be !’ says Murphy, stopping short in his trot across the

room, as if stricken into marble by this remarkable intelligence. ‘And is it beginnin’ to enthertain we are agin’ at this hour o’ the day?’ Here he turns smartly upon Nan. ‘An’ what’s bringin’ him?’ demands he, fixing that unabashed damsels with a searching eye. ‘Is it courtin’ he’s comin’, may I ax?’

‘Well, and if so, why not? Could he do a better thing?’ retorts Nan saucily. She dances up to the old servant, her hands upon her waist, and her charming face alight with gay defiance. ‘Look at me, Murphy. Pray whither should he go a-wooing if not here?’

‘That’s throe! I’ve nothin’ to say agin’ that,’ says Mr. Murphy cautiously. ‘Not this moment whatever, though I think ye might be a bit modesther in the sayin’ of it. The Delaneys of Rathmore are a match for them English Humes any day. But what’s destruyin’ me intirely is how we’re to enthertain him dacently.’

Mr. Murphy, who has so thoroughly identified himself with the Delaneys as to feel anxiety for their respectability in the matter of entertaining, here grows melancholy.

'Silver we can knock out of the masther under the purtext of its wanting a touch of whiting,' says he, bringing down the forefinger of one hand upon the forefinger of the other, as if counting their chances for and against social extinction. 'An' glass we can manage good enough—he wouldn't notice, I dessay, if ye kep' talkin'—but the style's the thing that bothers me: where's the style at all, at all! Gone! gone!' cries Mr. Murphy mournfully. 'Ne'er a ha'penny to keep it up. Och, why did ye ask him to supper? Wouldn't that contemptible cup o' tay ye're all so set on nowadays have done well enough for him? Childhren dear! have ye no sinse! Do ye niver think? Why will ye let yourselves down before people! an' people too'—proudly—'not fit to hould a candle to the Delaneys.'

'It is he who is going to let himself down before me—down on his knees,' cries Nan gaily, who now, with the rest of them, is beginning to enjoy herself immensely. 'But, Murphy, where's your spirit? It is here he'll be, I tell you.' She makes a little dramatic gesture towards that square of the carpet on which she stands. 'Plop! There he'll fall,' cries

she merrily, ‘a victim to my charms—a corpse, a slave?’

‘Maybe he won’t, thin, secure as ye think yerself, when he sees the rackrinted look of this ould place,’ says Mr. Murphy, with a grunt of disapproval, yet with an irrepressible glance of almost fatherly pride at the charming bit of conceit before him. ‘I wish ye’d give yer mind to the state o’ the house,’ says he angrily. ‘D’ye think ’tis fit for sstrangers—an’ for a Hume, of all others—him as has been at logger-heads wid yer people for years an’ years? Musha, what ails ye at all that ye can’t have a bit o’ pride about ye?’

‘How can we? it is all absorbed by you,’ says Penelope, laughing. ‘Oh, Murphy,’ drawing nearer to him, and slipping her pretty slender arms around his neck. ‘You are an old blood-sucker, that’s what you are! You have abstracted our best qualities, and now blame us because we are barren of them. I wonder you aren’t ashamed of yourself. I wonder you can look us in the face. Not so much as one drop of pride left among us, yet you—the robber of it—have the audacity to reproach us for the want of it.’

‘Oh, get away wid ye,’ says Mr. Murphy, with

just indignation and a look born to wither, but which has failed scandalously to perform the duty for which it has been brought into the world. ‘There ye are, gettin’ on wid yer blarny, whin ye know the throuble that lies before ye.’

‘Do you think you will be able to get the key of the plate-chest from father?’ asks Gladys apprehensively.

‘I do, miss. I think that indeed. I’ll choose me hour, whin he’s just over the dinner, an’ deep in thim ould books agin, an’ then I’ll get it. Rest aisy about that. But what about the cookin’, eh?’

‘We must only depend on Moriarty,’ says Nan despairingly. ‘What else can we do? Perhaps,’ with terrible doubt, ‘if we speak to her about it she will send up the chickens a little less raw than usual.’

‘She may—she may; though there’s no depindin’ on her. “The Lord sends mate, but the devil sinds cooks,”’ says Mr. Murphy sententiously. ‘However’—grandly—‘ye’ve got me.’

‘We have indeed!’ says Gladys, with a fervour that has something suspicious in it.

'But what's the good of one servant in this house?' says Penelope.

'What, indeed!' agrees Mr. Murphy. 'No more than a flea in Westminsther Abbey! Yet, what can ye do, me dears? There's only me and Moriarty whin all's tould; an' what good is she at all, at all? Still, there's me,' says Mr. Murphy, again, with rich encouragement.

Nan laughs.

'So there is,' says she. 'But considering all things, doesn't your heart fail you, Murphy?'

'Devil a fail!' says Mr. Murphy valiantly. 'The Delaneys is a big sight better than the Humes any day!'

With this he leaves the room, and, crossing the gaunt old hall, enters a small apartment (half-way down a dim corridor) that belongs exclusively to himself. Here he seats himself upon a table, and, taking his chin into his hand, scrapes it vigorously.

'Faix, it looks like it,' says he, at last, addressing himself. He purses up his lips, and the light of triumph brightens his small gray eyes. 'If he manes it, 'twill be the makin' of us. But what does he see

in her at all, a slip of a girl like that? Anyhow, men's fools! Hume! £10,000 a year if a ha'penny. Arrah, more power to you, Miss Nan! Here the old fellow plants his hands upon his sides, and grins softly, and executes a step or two, lightly enough, too, in spite of his age. But presently, his eyes falling on a garment that hangs from a peg on the back of the door, he grows serious again.

'It won't go much further,' says he, fixing this article with a rueful eye. As if reluctant to make sure of its delinquencies, he advances towards it slowly, and, taking it from the peg, lays it upon a chair. Truly, it is a coat that has done much service; a coat so tired, so worn out in discharge of its duty, that it may now with all honesty lay claim to the quiet of that sepulchre which awaits all well-behaved old garments.

'Tis green,' says Murphy, regarding it with deep regret; 'dom green! It can't go much further, an' who's to replace it? Not the masther for one! Divil a penny to be got out o' him barrin' the wages, an' that wid a power of throuble. But there's Miss Nan to be considered, an' the mistress's mimory too. God

rest her sowl!' says Mr. Murphy, with a pathetic solemnity, and a loving recollection that must have touched the heart of anyone that heard him.

He strokes the old coat with a tender hand, and divesting himself of the nondescript garment that already covers him, gets himself by easy and careful degrees into the ancient friend that for so many years has been his Sunday's best.

“ ‘Tis burstin’ in it I am,’ says he mournfully, after a brief survey of his figure. ‘ Faix, if I were to give way to one dacent cough ’twould be all over wid me ! ‘Tis a new one I’ll have to be gettin’, I’m thinkin’, an’ if I do ’twill be the death of me. Squeezin’ me here, an’ pinchin’ me there, an’ afraid o’ me sowl to sit down lest I put a crease in it. Oh ! musha ! why can’t the coat that suits one last for iver !’ A profound sigh. ‘ Well, I’ll tell ye the raisin o’ that, Paddy Murphy me son : ’tis because you yerself can’t last for iver. Ould age will be the ondoin’ o’ you an’ yer coat !’

Deep melancholy seems to follow on the deliverance of this sorrowful truth. Mr. Murphy gives way to dejection ; standing in the middle of the floor, he

lets his head drop forward, shaking it up and down, and up and down like a solemn old mandarin. Mechanically, as he does this, he strokes with one hand the sleeve of the old coat, and presently, as if unconsciously, turns up the frayed and aged cuffs of it. Suddenly, as he gazes on this dilapidation, his mood changes, and something, that is almost triumph, alters the expression of his face from dismal thought to self-congratulation. It is the look of one who has, in spite of all things, got the best of the bargain.

'Well, sorra a penny does this coat owe me,' says he. 'Twinty year if it's a day since I first got it, an' niver so much as a button gone asthray wid it. Arrah, 'twas a fine coat entirely, though I don't deny but I've had great throuble wid the brushin' of it of late years.'

Here he takes up a brush, as if instinctively, and begins to work away at the right sleeve.

'A good coat as iver was,' says he softly, keeping time, as it were, to the action of his hand. 'An' worthy of her who gave it to me. The poor little mistress! May the heavens be her bed, and may it be a soft one, too, for her, the crathure; for she'd a hard life here.'

A tear falls upon the sleeve he is still laboriously brushing, but he knocks it aside with his little finger.

'At all events,' says he sternly, as if with a determination to cast aside sentiment and bring himself back perforce to common-sense, 'I'm bound to make meself look daacent if Hume of the Castle is comin' here with an eye to Miss Nan! 'Twould niver do for him to take too low an opinion of us; an' a man-servant, nately attired, is the making of a place. Paddy, me boy, we're off to the tailor to-morrow, plaze God.'

He is just making a violent effort to get at his back with the brush, when William bursts into the room.

'What are you doing, turning yourself into a cork-screw? Here, give me the brush,' says he, dragging it, indeed, out of Murphy's hand and beginning to belabour his back with it in fine style.

'Gintly, darlint, gintly! 'Tis very tindher intirely it has grown,' says that old gentleman nervously.

Arrah, take care, Masther William dear, or faix you'll go bang through it! An' I may as well keep it whole for the night at laste, as Miss Nan has asked them gintlemen to supper.'

'That's what I came about,' says William. 'My hive is as heavy as lead. Do you think, Murphy, that honey would look nice on the table?'

'Beautiful, faix, an' no mistake about it,' says Mr. Murphy. "'Tis a grand head ye have on yer shouldhers. You know London gents niver gets a thing fit to ate in the counthry line. He'll be delighted wid the fresh honey. Though, indeed, me dear'—anxiously—'ye musn't let him make too free wid it, for its very thryin'; me sisther's daughther's child was near kilt by it. There, now, Masther William asthore, give over the brush. 'Tis sore in me back I am from ye; an', in truth, me dear, the owld coat's on its last legs. 'Tis gettin' another I'll be, an' at once, too, because o' Miss Nan.'

'A new coat. By George!' says William, aghast at this startling news. 'Are you really, Murphy? But why? What has Miss Nan got to do with it?'

'A power,' says Mr. Murphy sententiously. 'Mark my words, Masther William, if Hume of the Castle isn't comin here to make his own of her. An' if he is, shouldn't we all thry to put our best leg foremost? Troth, yes, say I; an' that's why I'm goin' to buy a

new coat, to let him see that it's no beggars the Delaneys are, for all he may have been tould. There, run away wid ye now, me dear. I've got the world an' all to do, an' to tackle your father about the silver first thing. Fegs, I hope he won't get wind o' Miss Nan's party to-night, or there'll be the devil an' all to pay.'

William, thus evicted, makes straight for the school-room, where his sisters are still discussing the coming supper.

'I say, I'll tell you something,' cries he. 'Such a thing! you'd never guess. What do you think? Murphy is going to buy a new coat. A new one—a brand new one. And all because he thinks Mr. Hume is going to marry Nan.'

Miss Delaney gives way to a rather angry laugh.

'You seem all determined to marry me to him,' says she, in a vexed tone.

'There is not one of us so determined as Mr. Hume himself,' says Penelope.

'Well, he shall be determined in vain,' declares Nan angrily. 'I shall certainly not marry him; no, never! Good heavens! the idea is absurd. A man

I met a few weeks ago for the first time ; a man I care nothing about—whom, indeed, it would take but little to make me detest : a very little more of this persecution, for example.'

'If you feel like that towards him, I don't think you ought to encourage him,' says Penelope gently, but in a rather displeased tone.

'Encourage ! How do I encourage him ? Now Gladys, what do you think ?'

'I think you are frightfully kind to him if you don't mean to accept him,' says Gladys, with all a girl's exaggerated manner, and with a total disregard of the fact that Nan has thrown herself upon her mercy.

'Well,' says Miss Delaney indignantly, 'it just comes to this, that one daren't be civil to a person nowadays, unless one wants the whole world to be down upon one. What do you want me to do ?'

'Accept him,' says Gladys promptly.

'Oh, no. Not unless you really like him. And—and besides, there is poor Boyle,' says Penelope nervously.

'Boyle ! Oh, nonsense ! Selfish fellow,' says

Gladys. ‘Mr. Hume is nicer than he is, though, indeed, I don’t think much of either of them,’ with a superb shrug of her thin and rather impertinent shoulders.

‘Well, neither do I,’ says Nan gaily ; she has quite recovered her temper, and is now laughing. ‘I don’t believe I shall ever care for anybody ; but in the meantime, whilst I am learning the truth about that, both Mr. Hume and Boyle are good enough to pass away my time with.’

‘Don’t go too far with Mr. Hume, and take my advice,’ says Penelope, with an earnest look at her.

‘Is he marked dangerous ? Have you been studying him ?’ asks Nan lightly.

‘So far as to learn that his will would be a difficult one to combat. I shouldn’t care to cross swords with him.’

‘Nor I with anybody,’ says Nan. Why need people go to extremes ? Why not enjoy the summer while it lasts, instead of perpetually looking forward to a gloomy winter ? ‘I wish you wouldn’t look at me like that, Penelope. One would imagine that you were yourself immaculate ; and yet you know

you made Freddy Croker's life a burden to him five days out of seven.'

Penelope flushes scarlet.

'Oh no,' says she, but rather weakly.

'Yes, yes ; that's quite true,' declares Gladys. 'And it is my belief you care as little for him as Nan does for Boyle or Mr. Hume. But never mind all that. Let's think about to-night. If they can't get home to dinner, those two men will be as hungry as hunters ; and that isn't all, either. It will be our first entertainment, and it would be horrible if they went home feeling dull. Now, how are we going to amuse them ?'

'You can leave that to me,' says William grandly, in the proud tone of one who has smoothed away a social dilemma.

CHAPTER XVI.

‘ Irish eyes ! Irish eyes !
Eyes that most of all can move me.’

‘ YOU have got home very early, haven’t you?’ says Nan, turning a little round on the garden bench on which they are both sitting, to get a better view of his face.

‘ Yes, perhaps so ; it didn’t seem early to me,’ says Hume, rather absently. The truth lies with Nan, however. He had assured her in the morning that he and Croker could not possibly get back from their sail before nine o’clock, and now it is barely eight. They had dropped anchor, indeed, astonishingly early, and had plainly lost no time in presenting themselves at Rathmore.

Mr. Croker is at present in the vegetable garden with Penelope ; Hume in the flower garden with Nan.

‘ You must be starving,’ says Nan.

‘ Oh no ! We had something with us, you know, and——’

He breaks off, absently still, and begins to trace cabalistic letters upon the gravel at his feet with his stick.

‘ Supper will be ready in about an hour,’ says Miss Delaney, speaking in a rather louder tone, as if to compel his attention. She is, in truth, a little wrathful because of this curious abstraction of his. ‘ Do you think you can last until then ?’

Evidently he is hungry. It must be some strong feeling indeed that can make him thus indifferent to her presence.

‘ Then ? Nine ? A capital hour for supper,’ says Hume vaguely, whose dinner-hour it has often been.

‘ I didn’t ask you that,’ says she, rather affronted. ‘ And it isn’t a capital hour, either. I know as well as you do that supper as a rule comes off at midnight. But when you have had no dinner——

‘ Nan,’ says he abruptly, *apropos* of nothing, ‘ are you engaged ?’

He has ceased from making those idle figures on the gravel and now leans forward, staring straight into her face.

‘Engaged?’ repeats Nan. She is too astonished to blush, or betray any emotion, save the crudest amazement—so astonished that she forgets even to be angry.

‘You mean——’

‘Engaged to be married,’ says Hume concisely.

‘No; of course not. What a question!’ cries she a little quickly, a little sharply, as if shocked.

‘In love?’

This time she forgets neither to blush nor to be angry. With a swift glance at him she springs to her feet.

‘Why do you speak to me like this?’ asks she, her cheeks dyed an indignant crimson. ‘Do you know what you are saying?’

‘Perfectly,’ says Mr. Hume slowly.

‘Then you must know that you are extremely rude,’ says Nan, with angry promptitude.

‘I have annoyed you,’ says Hume, as if rather surprised at this fact. He, too, has risen, and they both

stand looking into each other's eyes, Nan flushed and vexed, he thoughtful.

'Oh, more than that,' cries she.

'Well, I can't see why,' says he. 'I can't see that there is so much in that question, after all—to you. If you say "Yes," which of course you won't, why, there will be an end of everything, and the saying of it will cost you very little. If you can say "No," (which I devoutly hope you may), it will cost you even less.' He pauses and regards her keenly. 'Well, are you?' says he.

'Certainly I shall not answer you,' with a determination not to be shaken. She presses her lips together, and stands back from him as if distinctly offended.

'Which means, I suppose,' says he, 'that you are?'

'No, no!' vehemently, driven to confession in spite of herself by this unpleasant accusation. 'Why should it? In love! Why,' with withering scorn that does not pass him over, 'who is there down here to fall in love with?'

'Ffrench,' says he, undaunted.

'Really, you are too absurd!' says Nan, who has

nevertheless grown very red. ‘Oh, of course I know what you mean: you think that because I am sometimes civil to him, that I must needs be—— But all that only proves how stupid you are. It is nonsense, I tell you. I assure you,’ eagerly, ‘I am as much in love with Boyle as he is with me.’

‘Oh, I hope not,’ says Hume, with a curious smile. ‘If that be so, I am the unhappiest man alive.’

‘You purposely misunderstand me,’ says she, tapping her foot impatiently upon the ground. ‘I know you think Boyle likes me. But it is not so. We are friends, that is all. He doesn’t care for me in that way, and I don’t care for him.’

‘I hope the end of that sentence is not so false as its beginning,’ says Hume steadily, his eyes on her downcast face.

‘It is as true,’ defiantly.

‘Are you sure?’ says he. ‘Let me tell you something, then. If Ffrench does not love you, why—neither do I.’

Dead silence follows on this speech. After a slight hesitation Nan turns abruptly, and walks away. He follows her, however.

'You are angry? Why?' asks he. 'May I not love you? You suffer him: am I not as good a man?'

At this he laughs a little, either to induce her to condone the seeming conceit of his words, to forgive them, or else to conceal a touch of nervousness.

'Why will you speak to me like this?' says she, stopping short, and letting him see a charming face now pale and distressed. 'You have only known me a week or so, and——'

'I have known you always, I think,' interrupts he. 'I cannot now imagine a time when I did not know you. You have,' with a smile, 'killed time for me.'

'No wonder you are so—grateful to me,' returns she with an answering smile, and a swift coquettish glance as impossible for the girl to restrain as it would be for a more sedate sister to produce it.

'You don't dislike me?' says Hume, in a low tone, taking courage from the lovely glance.

'N-o. Oh no!'

'You like me, perhaps,' brave still in the presence of that last disheartening rejoinder.

'Ye-es,' says she dubiously.

'Don't you, then? Why can't you?' asks he.
'People here and there have liked me.'

'I dare say,' returns she, as if, however, a little uncertain about the probability of the matter.

Hume with a sudden unexpected touch of passion stops short, and catches her hands in his.

'At all events, you don't dislike me. Remember, you said that,' exclaims he almost fiercely. 'And more—you have assured me that you love no one.'

'No one,' says Nan, rather faintly, as if a little frightened by his vehemence.

'Well,' says he, recovering his composure instantly as he sees her growing nervous, 'as you are a woman, and therefore to be won, and as you will surely marry one day, why not marry me?'

Nan drags her hands out of his with considerable haste.

'You know I told you not to speak to me like this,' says she, with some agitation. 'You know I warned you; it is impossible—quite, quite impossible; and I could never think of you in that way—never, never!'

'Not in time?'

'Never.'

'I shan't give up hope, for all that,' says he doggedly, yet with a sharp sigh. 'Not so long as you can tell me with your own lips that you love no one else.' He regards her again intently as he says this, seeming to dwell upon the subject with a persistency that speaks of distrust. 'If all the world is indifferent to you, as'—with a searching glance at her—'you have said it is, give me a chance.'

'What is a chance?' asks she mischievously. She has now flung from her that first shy horror that had overcome her, when he had deliberately put aside the veil (a thin one, lately) that had stood between his evident admiration for her, and that deeper, stronger feeling that has become part of his life. She is now once again radiant, and, prompted by that irrepressible coquetry that forms so strong a portion of her nature, strives to strengthen the chains that already are too strong. Delight in this, her latest conquest, shows itself in the brilliant smile she now directs full upon Hume.

'In this case it would mean a reprieve—an escape from death,' says he.

'One would think you were a criminal,' says Nan,

laughing, yet with an admirable pout. ‘Is it in such a character as that that you come a-wooing?’

This is a distinct encouragement.

‘I may come, then,’ cries he, seizing his opportunity and her hand at the same moment. ‘Well, I will not protest too much, but,’ earnestly, ‘I entreat you to let the possibility of me as a suitor sink into your mind. Just now and then so to think of me may work a charm. And it is all I ask at present. As I have already said, you are bound to marry someone; why should it not be me?’

‘Why not, indeed!’ argues Miss Delaney with shameless frivolity. She throws up her faultless head as she says this, and turns upon him the full light of two big mocking eyes, throwing in besides, as it were, such an adorable smile that Hume makes a step towards her. It is a step so hasty, so charged with a fell purpose, that it is impossible not to read danger in it. Miss Delaney, with a promptitude that does her honour, takes a step on her own account, but backward this time, and might perhaps have even taken to an ignominious flight, but for the fact that in the drawing-room window that overlooks the garden

in which she is now standing Murphy is plainly to be seen, 'viewing the landscape o'er' with an appreciative eye. 'In a multitude lies safety.' Miss Delaney regains her courage; Mr. Hume, to whom that superior old person has also become visible, loses strength. Miss Delaney, casting on her late antagonist a mischievous glance of triumph, addresses herself specially to Murphy.

'Murphy!' cries she, calling out to him in a clear ringing voice that savours of victory. She waits for an answer, but that gentleman, who has been vigorously dusting nothing with a feather brush, whilst keeping a wary eye upon the two outside, decides not to answer. 'No, no,' says he composedly, communing with his own heart, whilst whirling the brush with renewed power; 'if he means anything, 'twill be a match for the honour an' glory of the family, an' who am I that I should interfere just now?'

So Miss Delaney calls to him in vain; but not for long.

'Murphy!' she cries again—a rather indignant inflection in her voice this time. So indignant,

indeed, that Murphy, assuming the most innocent expression at his disposal—and that is guileless indeed—advances, and, thrusting his head out of the window, says :

‘Did ye call me, miss, or was it dhramin’ I was?’

‘No, you were not dreaming,’ says Nan, with an angry glance at him that, I need hardly say, is passed over by this unscrupulous old man as though it had never been.

‘ “Tis failin’ I am,’ says he with a heavy sigh. ‘ Me sinses aren’t what they were. They’re decaivin’ me ivery day, bad luck to thim! And what d’ye want now, miss, eh?’

‘Where is Miss Gladys?’ asks she, fixing him with a glance that says plainly, ‘Don’t think you will take me in.’

‘I’ll see, miss,’ says Mr. Murphy, shuffling away.

‘What fools thim girls is!’ says he to himself, terrible contempt in his tone. ‘There’s her luck almost within her fist, an’ she wouldn’t close on it. Another minit an’ she’d have been as good as Mrs. Hume, an’ she must call on ould Murphy to come forward an’ break the words in his throat. Arrah,

what ails her at all, at all, wid her philanderin' here an' there, an' her tomfoolery? Fegs, 'tis born agin she'll have to be before she gets a grain o' sinse.'

'Come in, come in,' Nan is saying from the top of the balcony steps, up which she has run, seeing how Murphy has deserted her. 'Supper must be ready now, and I know you are starving.'

'I'm not,' says Hume.

'Well, there is something the matter with you, at all events,' says she with a wicked little glance.

CHAPTER XVII.

‘What need had we for thought or cares?’

* * * *

‘I can recall with what gay youth,
To what light chorus,
Unsobered yet by time or change,
We warned the many gabled grange—
All life before us.’

THE impromptu supper has proved itself a decided success. It has gone off without a hitch. Mr. Murphy has indeed surpassed himself, and behaved with such dignity, such noble care for the wants of all (Hume, however, very specially), that it is no wonder that the latter individual regards him with an admiring eye. It may safely be affirmed that up to this Mr. Hume has unhappily been ignorant of a butler so advanced in his ideas as Murphy.

The old attendant’s superior behaviour has not,

however, been altogether able to subdue the natural spirits of those whom fate, by a supreme mistake, has placed over him. The nondescript meal has been carried through with a gaiety that might almost be termed hilarious. To Mr. Hume, who has been accustomed only to the society of such well-regulated girls as are to be met with on the beaten paths of regular seasons in 'London town,' it occurs that the Delaney girls are singularly young and fresh, and unspoiled by this old world, through which we must all work our way (be it long or short) to the eternal world beyond.

But supper once over, a pang seizes upon the breasts of both Nan and Penelope. Neither of their guests, Hume or Croker, shows the slightest symptom of a desire to move on, and what is to be done with them for the remainder of the evening? Had they been older, or better versed in thought-reading, or a little more given over to vanity, they might have divined that neither of these young men seeks or desires anything better than their own most desirable and undiluted company. But as the case stands, they feel a little blank, and for a while after they return to the drawing-room conversation falls to zero.

Suddenly a diversion is offered to them that creates a little flutter in their breasts. Through the open windows that hold command of the avenue, Captain Ffrench may be seen approaching rapidly. His head is bent; with his stick he beats every now and then the unoffending air—he even decapitates a tall dandelion. It is, indeed, quite plain to all that he comes not in peace.

'What's he coming for at this hour?' says Croker, turning instinctively to Penelope, who is sitting near him, or, rather, whom he is sitting near. 'Nan, eh? or,' with a sharp distrustful glance at her, 'you?'

Penelope laughs.

'Is it for you?' questions Croker, staring even more keenly at her. 'I have often wondered at his devotion to this house, but—'

'You always thought it was Nan; very uncivil, but very true,' says Penelope.

'Is it true, though?' says Croker quickly. Like all true lovers, he cannot imagine how any man can admire another, whilst his own faultless one is within view. A young man, without sufficient prospects to give him a sense of *bien être*, rising barrister though

he undoubtedly is, Croker has, so far, shrunk from asking Penelope to share his fortunes. After all, the generous things that have been said of him by the senior Bar may or may not mean daily bread ; and until he is sure, what right has he to even try to win a girl's heart ? All this, of course, is decidedly correct in theory, but difficult to carry out in practice. The tongue may be obstinately silent ; but the eyes (those most insubordinate of features) will speak, and Penelope long ere this has told herself that Croker loves her. The little foolish touch of jealousy he now displays only adds to this belief. Out of the very fulness of her happy heart she laughs at it.

'Perhaps not, then,' says she saucily ; 'say it is this little girl,' laying her gentle hand upon her bosom, 'whom our warlike cousin loves. And after that, what ?'

'After that, nothing,' returns he shortly.

'Let me tell you that you are both wrong—both lost in a fog of folly,' says Gladys, parting the window curtains, and holding them one in each hand so as to let only her face be seen. 'It is to see me he comes, of course.' She stretches out her long,

thin, childish neck, and laughs aloud. ‘How stupid of you not to have thought of that before !’

‘For you, you ugly little thing ! go to !’ says Croker, regarding the childish creature with an amused glance.

‘Pouf ! A fig for you !’ cries Gladys, snapping her fingers at him. ‘Come, now ; a bet with you ! you profess to sneer at me, yet mark my words ; they’—pointing with distinct disparagement at her sisters—‘may marry commoners, and’—with an indescribably mischievous shrug of her shoulders—‘good enough for them, too ; but as for me, I shall marry *a lord* !’

‘Is that your unalterable decision ?’ asks Croker.

‘Yes.’

‘Then my prayers be yours !’ says Croker devoutly. ‘Yet,’ thoughtfully, ‘after all, you are but following out the old order of things that as yet changeth never. There must always be one old maid in every family. To disbelieve that would be to upset the Constitution. You shall be the old maid here — the Delaney old maid — the one who has defied the tyrant man !’

'Oh!' cries Gladys, darting towards him swift as a swallow, and pounding him sharply with her small hands. 'And there isn't a word of truth in it, either. Where is the old maid amongst the Blakes, or the D'Arcys, or the Desmonds? Come, now, answer me that!'

But to answer that is beyond him, and, indeed, to follow out his argument possesses elements of difficulty not to be overcome, Gladys looks so altogether unlike a person who might eventually be an old maid.

* * * * *

But even this diversion cannot hide the fact that there is little to be done to make the evening pass by without the damning yawn. Ffrench has come in, has been welcomed; has been smiled at by Nan, who receives only a scowl in return, and now what is to come next?

All the Delaneys are at their wits' ends to devise an amusement of some sort, that may overcome the chill that has followed on Ffrench's entry, when William, who has been mysteriously absent for half an hour, flings open the door, and, standing on the threshold, gazes benevolently on the assembled guests. All at

once Nan and Penelope remember his words of the morning, his promise to help ; they stare at him with hopeful eyes : evidently he is going to redeem his words—he is going to entertain these three young men whom Providence has thrust upon them almost without warning.

'Have any of you ever seen a devil?' demands William, in a deep sepulchral tone.

* * * * *

This extraordinary question acts like an electric shock on his hearers, and stiffens them all into silence. After a minute or so Croker takes courage, and lets a feeble remark pass his lips.

'The devil!' says he, half quizzically, half amused, a good deal surprised.

'When one comes to look into it, the answer to that question seems to depend very considerably upon what kind of devil you mean,' says Hume.

He speaks without prejudice of any sort, yet involuntarily his gaze falls on Ffrench. There is meaning in it of a kind hardly understood even by its creator ; but Ffrench catches it, holds it awhile, and then releases it by letting his eyes fall to the

ground. Is he a devil, then, in Hume's sight? His already too saturnine countenance takes an even gloomier tinge.

'A devil! I should love to see one,' cries Gladys at this eventful juncture, darting from behind her curtains into the fuller light of the lamps. 'And William makes them to perfection. Nothing like a powder-devil for fun! First it goes piff—piff, quite mildly, don't you know; then paff-paff, as it grows bolder, quite noisily, as it were; and then, at last, puff, puff, with a regular explosion. Oh, I do love a devil!'

'To look at her, one would scarcely expect it,' says Croker meekly.

'William! Have you got one ready now?' demands the third Miss Delaney, taking no notice whatever of this aside.

'Quite ready,' says William genially, and then, after a pause, 'too ready. You'll have to run, all of you, if you want to be in time. I'm afraid it's too dry. It's been made more than half an hour, and if too dry it may go off in spite of me.'

'That sounds like a threat,' says Croker.

'Supposing we should be a trifle late, and it went off, what would be the result?' asks Hume, addressing Nan, who, either by design or chance, has been drifted towards him. She has been equally kind to both him and Ffrench; therefore both young men believe themselves to be specially favoured by her. Nevertheless, Ffrench has not yet seen fit to cast aside the despondent mood with which he had entered. He takes upon him now to answer Hume's question.

'Probably blow the house to bits, with all the inhabitants thereof,' he says with such undisguised and ghoulish hope in his tone as strikes cold to the hearts of his listeners. He makes it plain to them, indeed, that should such a general burst-up take place, it would be rather to his liking than otherwise.

'Great Heaven! let us haste,' cries Croker, seizing upon Penelope, tucking her arm into his, and making for the door. 'Every moment is of value. Charge, William, charge! On, Stanley, on! Let us, at all events, face death with a goodly courage!'

CHAPTER XVIII.

‘I admire your tact, dividing
Smiles to each in equal share,
Lest one slave wax over-jealous,
Or another grow less zealous,
Beauty Clare.’

JUST before they reach the scene of William’s diversion—just, indeed, as they are all clattering noisily across the hall—Nan pauses and holds up her hands.

‘Easy, easy! Don’t make such a row!’ whispers she. ‘Father sleeps exactly over the schoolroom, and if he hears us there will be——’

‘The devil to pay,’ interrupts Bartle blithely. ‘Well, all right—we’re just going to pay it, with William’s help.’

‘I hope the smell won’t go up through the ceiling,’ says Gladys anxiously.

'Smell? Is there a smell?' asks Penelope, who is the daintiest of them all. She hangs back a little and looks nervously at Croker, who, surmising there is gunpowder to be used in the projected game, finds a difficulty in reassuring her.

'Oh, such a smell!' says a piping voice behind them. They all turn, and find the two children, like two culprits, gazing imploringly at them from the last step of the staircase. The elegant negligence of their costumes suggests the idea that they have been to bed and have just got up again. Appearances are oftentimes deceitful, but not in this instance.

Henjy's breeches are hanging considerably lower than they ought to hang; they betray, indeed, a singular longing to retire into his boots. His startled relatives, staring at him, lost in wonder at this freak on the part of his unmentionables, become presently aware of the fact that braces have been scornfully cast aside, and that nothing earthly still keeps him in the paths of decency save a stout piece of cord twisted tightly round his slim, lithe body. His coat is carelessness itself. He shows a good deal of shirt.

As for Miss Nolly, beyond the fact that her eyes

are big with sleep, and that her little white feet are thrust into her shoes regardless of stockings, there is nothing very remarkable about her.

'Oh, do let us come! Do, do, do!' cries she. 'Moriarty told us William was going to have a devil in the schoolroom. And we have been so good. We didn't say a word when you wouldn't let us come to the supper. Did we, now? Did we, Nan? We went to bed quite quiet, and let our stockings be pulled off without pinching up our toes. And we said our prayers, and—Nanny—*Nanny!*'

'Oh! they're dreadful—they're dreadful,' says Nan. 'But—yes—come on, you two—but not a word. Do you hear? Not one word.'

Like two mice the happy children advance, dancing a little breakdown as they come, and together they all enter the schoolroom.

It is a real schoolroom; that is, about the shabbiest room to be seen anywhere. Ink-stains here, paint-stains there; aged chairs, tables on the verge of dissolution. One old sofa that might have been purchased when the Ark furniture was put up to auction, supposing Mrs. Noah to have been fond of a nap now

and then out of season, which, after all, could hardly be accounted laziness on her part ; for what she was to do save sleep during those terribly dull days, forty days of rain, one's intellect fails to fathom. No novels, no gossip, no piano (the damp would have put it out of order at once), no friends to drop in and revile society at large.

In the middle of this room, upon the ink-stained floor, stands a dinner-plate with a black pyramid erect upon the centre of it. This harmless object (apparently) is the devil ! Like all such low acquaintances, it is not to be depended upon—is sure to play you false in the long-run. At present, however, this devil of William's sits there as calm as calm can be, without so much as a suspicion of guile about it.

'Now lower the lamp !' says William, taking precedence as Master of the Ceremonies. The lamp is lowered.

The room sinks into a gloom that hides its imperfections and almost raises it into beauty. All the onlookers, William's audience, stand round in a circle. The two children, full of delicious anticipation of something that may frighten them out of their wits,

stand together, and next to them Penelope, with Croker beside her. Then Hume, then Nan, and then Boyle Ffrench. Beyond these, completing the half-circle, stand Gladys and Bartle.

Now Nan, since Ffrench's entrance, had been specially kind to him ; she had not succeeded, indeed, in assuaging the wild ravagings of jealousy that had seized upon him when he saw her with Hume—an invited guest—on his first entrance into the drawing-room, but she had certainly succeeded in raising his passion to fever-heat. So quietly was this done, that Hume had not been at all unsettled in his now certain hope that time only was required to make her his.

She had refused him, indeed, in a shapeless, vague sort of way ; but that she meant that refusal—that she, at all events, meant it to be final—was surely denied by her manner, her tone, her glance (oh, what a glance !)—her whole air, indeed, as she stood on those balcony steps. There had been distinct encouragement in them, and even a gentle liking. No, he would be faint-hearted no longer ; he would believe in his power to win her. Perhaps he had been backward hitherto, had not declared his honest love for

her in language plain. There was time enough for that, but, as we all know, there is no time like the present.

The room is very dark by this. Emboldened by his new sudden resolution to lose no time, he puts out his hand—that one nearest Nan—and, catching hers, holds it fast. His heart beats high with hope as he finds that the slender fingers rest in his quietly, unresistingly. If they make no fond return for the warm pressure he bestows upon them, they do not at least repel it.

All is joy!—in one breast, at least—until unkindly Chance, that maddest of all imps, drops down upon them.

It is, indeed, this particular moment that Henjy (who is ever full of enterprise) elects to turn up the lamp, that hitherto has shrouded the dingy apartment in a delicate darkness—this moment in which Hume has for the first time assured himself that she has, at least, betrayed for him a preference—placed him in advance of his rival in her regard. Alas for all such fond hopes!

Henjy, stealing on tiptoe across the room—bent on

throwing light on William, who is kneeling on the floor before his devil, and evidently working some incantation which Henjy longs to see—suddenly throws a flood of light over the room, disclosing William indeed, but more than that: Nan, with her right hand tightly clasped by Hume—and—more than that, too—Nan's left hand clasped by Ffrench.

As though sharply smitten by some unseen power, both lovers let go the slender treacherous hands, and for a second stand staring, not at each other, but at her. Some faint last remnant of grace must lie hidden in her breast, because she blushes hotly, and hangs her pretty head quite low.

There is a long, a terrible pause, fraught with pain for some, and considerable danger for Croker, who is on the verge of apoplexy in spite of the indignant gaze that Penelope has fixed on him. This warm and most undesirable radiance that the child has cast upon the room has reduced all to silence. All save William. That youth, oblivious of everything except the successful going off of his dear devil, now causes a happy interruption by lifting up his voice and yelling out to Henjy with a fervour that might have

raised the dead, and that certainly reduces Henjy to the verge of despair.

'Hang it all!' cries he in a frenzied fashion, 'will nobody put out that light? Henjy, is this your doing? Go away! Go away, I say, or I'll——'

Words fail him. He still kneels before his black and dangerous fetish, looking like a huge sprawling frog; but though he glares at Henjy, who is evidently in the last stage of fright, nothing comes of it.

'What ails you?' roars William. 'Put out that light, I say! You'll spoil everything. Why don't you move? It is going off, I tell you!'

'My breeches are going off!' cries Henjy, with a miserable shriek and a wild clutch at those unstable garments. Somebody discreetly lowers the lamp once more; Penelope seizes on the discomfited child and speedily restores him to moral and physical comfort, and Croker is saved from death. Here is an opportunity given to laugh, and he takes it.

Once more darkness covers the room, but this time Nan bears its terrors alone.

'Look out! now it's going off, really,' cries William, through the gloom.

CHAPTER XIX.

‘ His work outlives him—there’s his glory !

* * * * *

AND off it goes, with a tiny spluttering and fizzing that increases momentarily. Golden sparks fly up from it that delight the beholders, with every now and then a thicker shower that draws shrieks of joy from the younger folks. It is, indeed, a most obliging little devil, and does its best to entertain its company. All grow interested ; all lean forward.

‘ Those paltry fireworks at the Crystal Palace couldn’t hold a candle to it,’ says Croker, with enthusiasm.

‘ I’m glad they are not in a position to do it, at all events,’ says Bartle. ‘ I say, William, the lower basement is rather thick, isn’t it ? Likely to go off, eh ?’

'Did you ever hear such a funk?' says William, with scathing contempt.

It is indeed remarkably stout at its base, altogether quite a prodigious pyramid of its kind, and takes a long time to work through. Not too long, however, for the enraptured audience—if we except two. They congratulate the delighted William, the children clap their hands; Hume so far recovers himself as to answer laughingly a remark of Penelope's.

But to every joy, as we all know to our cost, is given an accompanying grief. Presently all become aware of a diabolical incense, that, rising from the soup-plate on which the devil reposes, threatens to overpower the company with its detestable fumes. Everyone at first — out of regard to William—tries hard to endure it in silence; everyone is slow to speak about it; all try to smother their feelings and their faces in their pocket-handkerchiefs.

Human nature at last, however, gives way. The powder proves too much for Mr. Croker.

'What a heaven-born perfume!' exclaims he in a fainting tone.

It is the signal for a general chorus of dismay.

‘Pouf! Oh, William, William!’ breathes Nan, as though suffocating. She has been buried in her handkerchief, almost from the first ; drowned in remorseful tears as both Ffrench and Hume hope, eying her through the semi-darkness, but now they are undeceived : for the second time she has dealt most treacherously with them ; William’s devils are not unknown to her, she had only been preparing for the worst. Her voice is one of muffled agony ; it almost suggests itself to her hearers that she is holding her nose with all her might.

‘Rubbish!’ speculates William unfeelingly ; ‘one would think none of you fellows had ever held a gun !’

This is manifestly unfair, as Miss Delaney is not a fellow, and certainly never held a gun in his sense. But though remonstrated with, William sticks to his guns and declines to apologize.

And still the devil burns slowly on, still the odour rises. One thought, and one only, is in every mind now—how to escape from the room without offending William, before death overtakes them. Looks are interchanged, but each one recoils from taking the first step. As for the girls, they indeed feel bound to

remain : was it not for their benefit, to please them, to help them to entertain their guests, that William organized this show ? Gratitude forbids their departure, at all events. To basely desert him now, after all the pains he has taken for their sakes—no ! it is not to be done.

‘What can’t be cured must be endured,’ quotes Gladys to Bartle in a tone of solemn resignation. ‘Though I must say I call it a shame that we should be sacrificed when it is only Nan and Penelope who——’

The words die on her lips.

Crash ! Bang ! K-r-r-r-r ! Merciful powers ! what on earth has happened ? The thing, the devil, has gone off—has exploded—and William—where is William ? Is William dead ?

‘William ! William !’

Great Heaven ! why doesn’t he speak ? Is he lying about in bits that he makes no response ? Will nobody turn up that lamp ?

Somebody does, only to make wretched conjecture a still more wretched truth. As light is cast upon the scene of this cruel catastrophe, a truly awful

spectacle presents itself to the eyes of the horrified spectators. The devil—true child of Satan—is scattered to the four winds, the soup-plate has found a home in many corners, and in the very middle of the débris, prone, apparently lifeless, lies William, or what remains of him, so flat, so spread, so altogether one with the floor, that involuntarily, even in the midst of one's grief one wonders what can have become of his nose. Is it squashed out of all recognition?

They rush forward. They fling themselves precipitately upon their knees. Mr. Hume, catching hold of the motionless figure, turns it over. William's face is at last exposed to his sorrowing relatives.

And what a face!

The children give way to shrieks; their elders maintain an awestricken silence, as though frozen by fear. William's face is as black as your hat! Jet black!

Moreover, the eyelashes and eyebrows have disappeared, and the hair over the left ear is as though it had never been. The ear, however, remains.

This last fact conveys some sense of comfort to the stricken onlookers. William's flesh, black though it

be, is at all events intact. How quietly he lies, poor soul !

Plainly, it is all over with William. Nan begins to sob ; the other girls follow suit--the children have already raised a hideous din. Hume, stooping down, lifts this latest—and truly terrible—Christy Minstrel off the floor and on to his arm, and contemplates it with a wondering grief. Was ever negro quite so black ?

After all, he wasn't half a bad boy. Poor William ! So quiet now, so—— All at once he relinquishes his hold of William, and lays him back upon the floor. The corpse has begun to kick, and kick badly. Not slowly, decorously, as a corpse should, but with a vigour, a violence, not to be surpassed. In death, as in life, William holds his own.

He rises on his heels now, and casts an indignant glance around him. His eyes are rolling terribly. The children, staring at him aghast, wonder whether William always had that amount of white beneath his lids, or whether the effect of an explosion is to generate this glaring look. If the first supposition be the true one, William has evidently kept things from

them! They begin to lose sympathy with him, and to nurse a grievance.

'It went off,' says William, staring in a vacant manner at the bits of broken soup-plate that lie shattered near his left foot—at least, such fragments as go to prove that a plate of that particular pattern had once been there.

'It did,' says Croker feelingly, and very nearly carried you with it. How's your head?'

'Eh?' says William. Croker's manner has evidently frightened him, and he puts both hands up to the member in question, as if to see that it is still there. 'What ails it?' demands he, after a careful handling of it, and with such a return of his old gruffness as gladdens the hearts of the children and convinces the others that it is really William himself in the flesh who speaks.

They are still further convinced presently. William, staring at the china chips that surround him, says anxiously:

'The plate's broken.'

'A little,' says Croker. 'But don't be unhappy about that. Memory will always sustain us:

“ You may break, you may shatter,
The plate if you will,
But the scent of the powder
Will hang round it still.”

‘ Pick me up,’ says William to Hume, taking no notice of this volatile flight on the part of Croker.

Hume plants him firmly on his feet, where, in utter contradiction to all their conclusions, he stands as firm as a rock, and apparently none the worse for his accident, if one excepts his blackened face.

‘ It was too dry,’ says he ; ‘ I told you so in the drawing-room, but not one of you would hurry. And so, of course, it went off with a bang as it got too low. No harm done, however. I say, Nan, what is to be done next, eh ?’

He is still true to his desire to help them.

‘ If I might suggest something,’ says Hume, laughing, ‘ it would be a liberal application of soap and water to your face.’ As he speaks, he regards the dilapidated William with almost unreserved amusement.

‘ Why ? What’s the matter with it ?’ demands William.

'Nothing—nothing to signify,' says Croker, 'except, perhaps, a slight deepening of the original tint.'

'Oh, William, don't mind him!' cries Henjy, at this point; 'you are black—black as the coal. Oh, oh!' Here he again dissolves into tears, and hides his face on Nan's shoulder.

'Did it hurt you, William?' asks little Norah, drawing near, with uncertain steps, as if half afraid of him. 'Did it burn? Was it like hot coals?' She is evidently athirst for knowledge.

'It was, I think,' says William, rather vaguely.

'Was it like what King David says, "like coals of fire on your head"?' pursues Norah, who is bent on getting all she can out of it.

'The image of it,' says Croker. 'You remember that book "She" you are so fond of? You remember the "hot-potting" business in that? Well, those "coals of fire" you spoke of just now is the first known hint given about that delightful old punishment—the origin of it, in fact. But they found the coals difficult to manage: they would not stick, do you see, so a very scientific fellow they had in their midst most fortunately thought of the pots. His suggestion was at

once adopted, as being surer, and decidedly more graceful. From that still later—here in our own times—comes the chimney-pot hat. Most interesting, eh? See it?"

'No, I don't,' says Nolly brusquely, eying him with manifest distrust.

A short but eloquent exclamation, coming from Gladys, at this moment puts an end to the argument.

'What is it?' asks Penelope, turning to her.

'Listen!' says she, holding up her hand, with such a terrified expression on her countenance that instantly they all grow as rigid as herself, and begin to strain their ears with all their might.

Tap, tap, tap. The sound of a stick—the sound of two shuffling feet. Near, nearer still; awfully near now—in fact, just outside the door.

'Father!' says Nan, in a frozen tone. Forgetful in this supreme moment of her late disgraceful behaviour, she turns instinctively to Hume, as if to implore his assistance to sink through the floor.

Alas! the disappearing-lady trick is unknown to him. He has culpably neglected his education in the

most essential line. Miserable man! his ignorance is now his undoing.

The footsteps come to a standstill just outside. Within, deadly silence reigns. The handle rattles. The door slowly opens.

CHAPTER XX.

‘But now his nose is thin
And it rests upon his chin,
Like a staff ;
And a crook is on his back,
And a melancholy crack
In his laugh.’

* * * * *

SUCH a figure presents itself to their awe-stricken eyes that at first Hume (to whom alone it is a stranger) hesitates as to whether it is really a man or only a ‘tatter’t boggart.’ An instant’s reflection, however, convinces him that it is indeed Mr. Delaney who stands over there glowering at them and covering them with an evil eye.

A small, lean, unkempt old man, with a mean, malicious face, and shrunken limbs clothed in a scanty garment that might by courtesy be termed a dressing-

gown. On his gray and streaming locks sits an abnormally tall nightcap, surmounted by a tassel that goes bob, bob, bob into his left eye. Naturally this incessant tattoo increases the indignation with which he is already overcharged ; yet it never seems to occur to him to alter the position of the irritating tassel. Hume, still lost in amazed contemplation of the striking object in the doorway, begins to wonder whether the astounding cap is not part of the head, and if the tassel grew like that, and cannot now be altered.

‘What’s all this about?’ demands Mr. Delaney, glaring round him, and plainly undisturbed by shame at the spectacle he presents to the eyes of his visitors.
‘What’s all this about, eh?’

This delicate question goes unanswered. Nan has meanly got behind Hume, and Penelope has taken shelter in the shadow of an old bookcase. As for Gladys, lost to all hope, she has begun to laugh, silently indeed, but immoderately, helplessly.

Receiving no reply, Mr. Delaney gathers up his loins and fixes his attentions on the luckless Croker, who happens to be nearest him.

'Mr. Croker, eh?' snarls he, in a high squeaking voice, that is one of his many unpleasant characteristics. 'Mr. Croker, I think?' He peers at Croker from under the tassel in an insolent way, as if unsure about his personality. 'Very welcome beneath my roof, I'm sure, Mr. Croker. But—er—to what am I indebted for your presence here?'

'I asked him, father,' says Bartle, coming forward, very red, very nervous, and outrageously angry. For a boy of his age, just stepping from extreme youth to the wider manhood, what greater misery can there be than to see a guest ungenerously treated in the home of his fathers?

'You don't say so!' says Mr. Delaney with an air of jubilant astonishment. 'Your father being reduced to a state of dotage, you very kindly exercise the rights of hospitality in his stead. Thank you, my good Bartle, a thousand thanks. This being so, and my state of imbecility being mercifully lightened for a moment or two, perhaps you will introduce me to your —our other guests.' He passes his glance deliberately from Croker to Ffrench (who is plainly longing for the fray), and from Ffrench to Hume.

'For example,' says this dear old man softly, staring at Hume, 'who is that extremely handsome person over there?'

Hume, being outside the pale of beauty, this shell is evidently delivered with a view to insult.

'My name is Hume, sir,' says that young man. 'I am a near neighbour of yours, and am very pleased to make your acquaintance. I left my card, but was unfortunately unable to—'

'See me!' interrupts Mr. Delaney. 'True, you didn't see me. That misfortune is, however, rectified now. As to being my near neighbour, Mr. Hume, I would quite as soon some other man were that. Your uncle, that disreputable old Colonel, who—'

'Father!' says Bartle furiously.

'You seem disturbed,' says Mr. Delaney, turning to him. The old lean face has grown livid; the gray, keen ferret eyes are glowing. 'You would correct me, my son,' says he, with an abominable suavity. 'You—you—'

Here all at once the suavity gives way, the virulent nature of the man breaks loose.

'Be off! Out of my sight, scum of the earth!'

shrieks he in his squeaking falsetto. ‘How dare you dictate to me! Am I master in my own house or not? I’ll show you! Nan, Penelope, where are you lurking? Do you think I’m going to countenance your lovers, or whatever they are? is there no shame left amongst you? Get out of this—get out, the whole pack of you!’ flinging his arms abroad, and stamping so wildly that the old dressing-gown is on the very verge of a final dissolution, and heaven alone knows what would have been the result of that. ‘I’ll have no interlopers here. I’ll show you that my house is my own. What, what, what! I’m to be a cipher within my own four walls, I suppose, whilst racketings, and shoutings, and explosions are going on under my very nose. William! Is that William?’ surveying that latter-day negro with a demoniac glance. ‘Come here, come here, I say.’

‘Oh, murder!’ says William, and dashing past Nan, who is in his way, he steps upon the windowsill, and precipitates himself into the garden beneath.

‘This is the result of your teaching, no doubt,’

says Mr. Delaney, now addressing Nan. ‘Insubordination everywhere. Tcha! tcha!’ This extraordinary ejaculation he fires off with the facility of long practice. It is a truly hateful noise, a cross between a bark and a snuffle, and charged with spiteful anger. ‘Now, I will have you understand that for the future I forbid all such dissipation—I forbid guests, I forbid late hours, I forbid light conduct of any kind. I forbid’—grandly—‘everything.’

This is the climax. Drawing his nondescript garment round him, as though full of the proud belief that it is a toga, Mr. Delaney slowly lets his eyes travel over his guests until at last they rest on his eldest son.

‘Bartle—a word with you,’ says he. There is malignancy in his glance. He has not been blind to the fact of his son’s indignation at his conduct, and a longing to give him a verbal chastisement is consuming him. Stalking majestically to the door, his miserable figure drawn to its fullest height, he disappears into the hall beyond, Bartle following.

‘What’ll he do to him?’ whimpers Henjy, coming now from behind Penelope’s skirts.

'Providentially it is too late for him to be hungry,' says Croker. 'So he won't eat him. He must have supped before this.'

'But he may beat him,' suggests Nolly, whimpering too. 'Oh, I wish I was in bed! Perhaps he'll come back, and——'

'If he does, his blood be on his own head,' says Croker, taking her up in his arms; 'for I vow I'll slay him. What! Does he take us for common cowards, then? A fig for him, say I! I'm as good as a dozen of him any day. "Fee, Fo, Fum," of ancient memory, was a trifle to me when once roused. As sure as your pater puts his head inside this door again to-night I'll have his life. Hume! fetch me down that bow and arrow.'

'Oh! But are you sure you won't miss him?' says Miss Nolly fearfully.

'Norah! what a naughty girl you are!' cries Nan, colouring, and feeling, somehow, a little pang at her heart for this unloving father, who is still her father. 'Would you really wish father to be killed? Put her down, Freddy, and don't talk to her like that. It is not right, and she is such a baby; she

doesn't mean anything really, I am sure. Do you, now, Nolly ?'

'Yes, I do,' says Nolly sullenly, unsoftened and unrepentant.

After this they all sink into a significant silence, awaiting the return of Bartle. To break up the assembly until his fate be known would be to basely desert him. But will he return, or is he being, even now, consigned to a dungeon keep, where rats alone hold sway? Horrid thought!

The sound of his footsteps, as presently they clatter on the hall outside, is music to them.

'Well, well, what did he say?' asks Nan, rushing forward as he enters.

'He said "Tcha! tcha!"' returns Bartle, with violent disgust. Beyond this he refuses to tell anything, and, indeed, it is plain to all that he has suffered much (in mind, at least) during his late conflict with his father.

'It is getting late,' says Croker, looking at his watch. 'I suppose we ought to bid you good-night?'

'I suppose so,' says Nan, sighing.

'It's a most lovely moonlight night,' says

Gladys suddenly, who has been staring out of the window.

'And it is no distance to the gate,' puts in Croker encouragingly.

'Yes, let's go there,' says Bartle—'all of us. I feel as if I wanted air or something.'

'Poor darling boy,' says Nan, slipping a most snowy arm around his neck, 'you have been badgered, haven't you? And such a preparation for a night's reading, too!'

'What is he reading for?' asks Hume abruptly, not of Nan, however—of Penelope.

'He is going in for the Indian Civil Service exam.,' says she; 'and he's sure to pass, too, he's so clever.'

'Penelope!' roars Bartle instantly, growing the colour of blood.

'But, indeed, Penelope only speaks the truth,' says Nan sweetly. 'Everybody knows you are perfectly sure to get through; they say you will be the cleverest candidate that—'

'Oh, go to the deuce!' roars Bartle again, with all that ingratitude so common to the best of brothers.

'Come on to the gate, if you mean it,' continues he savagely, 'or else——'

'No, no, we're coming,' says Penelope soothingly.

They all move towards the door in a body. There is a slight confusion when they get to it. It is this opportunity that Ffrench seizes upon to go up to Nan, and address her for the first time since the turning up of that fatal lamp, to which Aladdin's was as nothing.

CHAPTER XXI.

‘ You know not what it is to pine
With ceaseless vain regret ;
You never felt a love like mine
You never knew Annette.’

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‘ I WISH to speak to you,’ says he.

‘ Eh?’ says Nan, with a mean desire to gain time. ‘ Oh yes ; yes, certainly. To speak to me ? Of course, dear Boyle. Well ?’ with the airiest air in the world, and the most innocent, as if seeing no earthly reason why he should not unburden himself here, on the instant.

‘ Not here,’ says he—‘ outside. Walk with me to the gate.’ His tone is almost a command, but Nan, after a wild glance around, sees no means of evading it. If, indeed, she had not hopelessly offended Hume also, he might have been used as a defence.

'I shall be delighted,' says she, telling her lie with an effort at jubilation that by no means deceives her companion. 'Was there ever so sweet an evening for a walk?'

'Never,' retorts he grimly.

They are at the hall-door by this time; no one else seems to be near them. By some unfortunate chance, whilst she was talking to Ffrench the others had entangled themselves in an impossible argument that it might take months to arrange. Nan, after a last despairing glance backwards, submits to black fate, and goes with Captain Ffrench into the vivid moonlight that lies like a white flood upon the gravel outside.

Presently the others, giving up the argument, pour out into the exquisite night beyond, and, standing on the gravel, look round and backwards, as if for Nan.

'She has gone on,' says William, who has rejoined them with a face resuscitated. 'I saw her go down that walk with Ffrench.'

'Oh!' says Penelope under her breath.

Not so low, however, but that Croker can hear it, and the dismay in it.

'Yes. Isn't she catching it?' says Bartle. He fondly believes he is whispering to Penelope, but some whispers carry far. Hume hears this one at least, and a sharp contraction at his heart compels him to know that he is pained by the hearing. Why should she 'catch it' from Ffrench? what right has he over her? By her own lips he judges her, and those soft if cruel members have assured him that Ffrench is an 'unconsidered trifle' so far as she is concerned. Yet oftentimes the softest lips have lied! His face pales a little as he tells himself that, lie or no lie, he will hold her to what she has said, and gain her in spite of herself and all the world besides. Into his usually quiet face there comes at this moment an expression of such dogged determination as could be only betrayed by an Englishman, and that one with every fibre of his body set on one resolve, and one only. He turns away abruptly, and, leaving the others—who have chosen the more general avenue—goes down that path of which William had spoken.

Meantime Penelope has been answering Bartle.

'Catching it? From Boyle? Why?' says she shortly. Croker, who is beside her, takes note

involuntarily of the little frown that accompanies this speech.

'Stuff! As if you didn't know,' says Bartle. 'As if it isn't as plain to you as to the rest of us that he is idiotically in love with her.'

'I know nothing of the kind. You shouldn't speak like that, Bartle,' says Penelope, bent only on being loyal to Nan, but with such a vehemence in her loyalty that Croker turns suddenly to look at her.

For the moment a suspicion, hateful to him, crosses his mind, but he puts it from him. That she should love Ffrench! Oh no! Impossible! And yet little things, trifling words, half-glances, sometime forgotten, but now remembered, flood his memory. For a torturing minute or so he gives room to the vile demons, and then casts them behind him—not slain, however.

By this time Nan and Ffrench have found their way through the branching trees to that point where they must needs turn to gain the main avenue. This is Ffrench's last chance, and he knows it. Hitherto, surcharged as he has been by indignant thought, he

has abstained from reproaching her ; but now that minutes have reduced themselves to moments he gives way to the overpowering passion that has been for so long his master.

They had been talking the commonest trivialities up to this—a style of conversation generously encouraged by Nan—but now, turning to her, Ffrench stops dead short upon the leafy path.

‘This sort of thing can’t go on for ever,’ says he abruptly.

‘Eh?’ returns Nan, startled. Then, with a sudden cowardly determination to misunderstand him, with a view to gaining time, she laughs. ‘An incontestable fact!’ says she, with a great assumption of gaiety. ‘Do you really want to walk this path for ever? It’s a rather shabby little affair, isn’t it?’ with a glance at the irregular, weed-grown little way in question. ‘I’m afraid, even if your idea were a practicable one, that presently the delights of it would pall upon—’

‘There is nothing to be gained by subterfuge,’ interrupts Ffrench, his black gloomy eyes upon the ground. ‘Do you think I was blind to-night? Do

you? I wish,' passionately, 'I *had* been before I saw you standing with your hand in his.'

'My hand was in yours, too,' says Miss Delaney—why, not even she herself could have explained. If with a view to soothing him, it was a most mistaken one.

'Yes, that was the most cursed part of it,' says he, with a sudden blaze of wrath. 'Great Heaven! have you no conscience? You have encouraged me, drawn me on, wilfully, openly, and now you would encourage him!'

'I don't want to encourage anybody,' says Nan petulantly, the colour coming and going on her rounded cheek. 'I wish you would all go away. I am quite tired of everybody, and of being scolded and misunderstood.'

'Well,' said he, with a rather saturnine smile, 'I think there is no danger of your being misunderstood by *him* again. If I saw, he saw, too.'

'I'm sure I'm glad to hear it,' declares Nan, with a little indignant tilt of her chin. 'It gives me immense happiness to hear that both your visual organs are in good working order.'

After this sally there is silence for a moment or two.
Then—

‘You don’t care?’ says he, with so much deep grief in his tones that she grows miserable, and therefore angry.

‘Oh, what is there to care about?’ cries she. ‘You would make a mountain out of every molehill. I really think you are one of the most tiresome people I ever met in my life. ‘If—if I do like to amuse myself a little, what great harm is there in that?’

‘Harm! to find amusement in the pain of others? Don’t you see how intolerably selfish it is of you?’ says the young man darkly. ‘You don’t mind what torture you inflict. I don’t believe you care for a single soul on earth except yourself.’

Miss Delaney, whose transitions of mood are so swift and uncertain that they cannot be relied upon, instead of here betraying a righteous anger at this unwarrantable speech, gives way to mirth.

‘You believe wrong, then, my sapient Boyle,’ cries she, plucking a tiny bit of thistledown from her sleeve, and blowing it lightly, with pretty pouting lips, into the air. ‘I care for many a one in this dull old

world, besides the charming person you have named. Why, a secret for you'—leaning towards him and laying her hand upon his arm in a coaxing, confidential fashion—‘I care for you!’

This is going a little too far. Ffrench's dark eyes grow brilliant with a touch of suppressed fury, and with a savage movement he flings aside the small slender hand that is resting so lightly on him.

‘Don’t speak to me like that!’ says he fiercely.

‘Well, and why not to you, you rough boy?’

‘Because you waste time. I do not believe you.’

‘How rude of you to give me the—you know *what*, in that way,’ she says provokingly. ‘Why should you not believe me? Are we not cousins? are we not, indeed, brothers in affliction—*my* Julia being *your* Julia, too. By-the-bye, Boyle,’ with an entire change of manner—from the tender mocking to the downright commonplace, ‘how do you manage to endure her as you do?’

‘I have got to endure worse things than Julia,’ says he coldly.

‘Me, you mean! Well, but there’s no necessity.

You needn't. Why on earth martyr yourself? You can go away, or keep away,' says pretty Nan, shrugging disdainful shoulders at him. 'Eh?'

No answer.

'It is quite in your own power. I shan't interfere. Why on earth don't you give me the cut direct?' demands she persistently.

'You know,' says he, so wearily that it should have softened her; and, in fact, it does. After a struggle, short but sharp, between her better self and the demon of mischief that is always at her elbow, the good angel conquers, and Miss Delaney with a sigh prepares to lay down her arms.

'Perhaps, after all, I'm sometimes wrong,' says she, making this singularly humble concession with all the air of one who, though faultless, feels it will be gracious to give in to the false prejudices of those around. 'If I have offended you or annoyed you, Boyle, I'm sorry. I am indeed. Is that enough?'

'More than enough,' cries he vehemently. 'And, after all, you didn't mean it, Nan, did you? You just gave him your hand because——'

'Yes, yes; just so,' hastily. 'Just for fun, don't

you know. Nothing else—nothing at all. And don't let us talk any more about it. It isn't worth it, really.'

'No, he isn't,' says Ffrench, rearranging her words for her with a buoyancy that somehow depresses her. 'Nan,' says he, 'will you meet me on Croachna Hill to-morrow at four o'clock? there is every sign of a coming storm, and a view of the waves from there should be splendid.'

'To-morrow—I can't.'

'Why not?'

'I—— Now, don't get into a rage again, Boyle, but I've promised Mr. Hume to go for a sail with him to-morrow.'

'Alone?'

'Of course not. How absurd you are!'

'With whom, then? Penelope is going with Julia to a picnic at the Galley Head; so is Gladys; so are the boys.'

'Well, I'm not. Julia is too trying for me. A little of her goes a long way. Mr. Hume has asked the Leslies to go for a sail to-morrow, and I'm to meet them at Glandore. We all go on board together.'

'When did you make this arrangement?'

'Quite a week ago.'

'I don't think you will carry it out, then, unless Hume is a bigger duffer than even I think him. There will be nasty sea weather to-morrow.'

'Time will tell that. For my part, I believe we shall have a glorious day,' says Nan, glancing upwards at the sky, which looks good-natured enough to an inexperienced eye. 'I hope so, at all events, as I dearly love a sail.'

'You won't get one,' says Ffrench with decision. 'Well, if not to-morrow, will you meet me on Croachna Hill the day after?' Then, seeing her hesitate, 'Oh, Nan, don't refuse me!'

'I won't. I didn't mean to,' says she eagerly. 'I'll be there certainly. Yes, yes, indeed. You may depend upon me. If,' with a little laugh, 'Mr. Hume doesn't drown me to-morrow, you will see me on Croachna Hill the day after.'

'Your hand on that,' says he, smiling. He holds out his, and Nan lays her shapely fingers on his palm. It is at this moment that Mr. Hume, turning a corner, comes up to them.

CHAPTER XXII.

'It's her sport and pleasure to flout me,
To spurn, and scorn, and scout me.
But, ah ! I've a notion it's nought but play.'

* * * *

IT is impossible for the most innocent people in the world to be discovered suddenly hand in hand without betraying some confusion. Nan colours furiously, a fact, however, hardly noticeable beneath the mild rays of the moon ; but her start backwards the mildest mannered moon that ever decked the heavens could not conceal. As for Ffrench, the smile dies upon his lips, and his brows grow together.

'Are we late ? Have the others sent you in search of us ? Surely they cannot be at the gate yet ?' says Nan, asking these questions at racing speed, and turning a nervous conciliatory smile on Hume, who ignores it.

'Nobody sent me. I came of my own accord to find you. I want to speak to you!' says he sternly, using the very words Ffrench had used, and speaking as deliberately as though Ffrench was nothing more than one of the trees around.

'To me?' says Nan, inwardly quailing, but outwardly the very picture of guileless curiosity.

'Yes.'

'Well, here I am,' says she, with another even lovelier smile, that meets the fate of its predecessor.

'Come, then,' says he, making a step forward and using a gesture that must be translated into a desire to take her with him.

'But where?' asks she, drawing back.

'Anywhere you like. Except here,' shortly.

'Nan, it is quite time you joined your sisters,' says Ffrench at this juncture. It is with difficulty he is suppressing the rage that is consuming him, but blended with this rage is an unmistakable sense of triumph that betrays itself in his voice, and in her present mood makes Nan indignant.

'There is no great hurry,' says she coldly. 'Go on, you, to the gate, and tell them I am coming. Mr.

Hume wishes to speak to me. There is no reason why I should not hear him.' Then, seeing Ffrench hesitate, she turns abruptly to him. 'Go!' she says, so imperiously that nothing is left him save obedience.

'Now,' says she, lifting her eyes to Hume's when her cousin is out of sight, 'what is it you have to say?'

It is plain her patience is at an end. She had subdued herself whilst Ffrench was present for several reasons, but now she gives full scope to her resentment. She has thrown up her head so that Hume can see how white her face has grown, and that the large gray eyes are flashing.

'Very little,' says Hume briefly, perfectly undisturbed by her tone. 'Just a word or two; but a word I mean. My eyes have been opened to a good deal this evening, but I still hold you to your word that you are not engaged to be married. And I swear to you,' quite calmly still, but with a little ring in his voice, 'that whilst I live you shall marry no man but me! Not Ffrench or any other man, but only me.'

'Is that all?' says she, with an angry little laugh. 'You are quite welcome to swear as much and as

long as you like, so that I do not hear you. I dislike that sort of thing. But as to marrying me, that is another affair altogether. How are you going to do it? The days are past when one could capture a wife.' She flings him a scornful glance as she says this.

'I shall at all events prevent your marrying anyone else.'

'And how?' demands she again contemptuously. 'The days of the poisoned bowl and the midnight assassin are gone, too, with the coach and four and the masked hero. And as for me, I tell you I am afraid of no one, of nothing. And as far as I can judge at this moment, it is my thorough belief that I perfectly hate you!'

Something in her words sobers him to sadness.

'Why will you talk to me like this, Nan?' says he in a low tone. 'Would you altogether break an honest heart? and that is mine for you. Is it nothing to you, the pain I am enduring?'

'Oh! now you just repeat *him*—Boyle,' cries she. 'I wish you would all let me alone. I don't want to marry anyone. I don't indeed,' almost piteously. 'I

only want to be left in peace. As to marrying, I should hate to be married. To be chained down as it were for all one's life, oh no! I——'

'That is enough,' says he, interrupting her hastily. A rather lengthened pause ensues, and then, 'Remember, you told me you do not care for him,' he says slowly.

'I told you something more than that, I think—that I do not care for you either.'

She says this so provokingly, with such evident malice, that he loses his temper.

'I wonder why I waste my time thinking about you?' says he vehemently. As he speaks he seizes her arm, and compels her so to turn that he can look into her eyes. His grasp under the influence of passion is perhaps more painful than he knows, because she flinches, and by an abrupt movement releases herself from him.

'Oh, you are cruel!' cries she, and presses her hand upon that portion of her arm where his fingers had closed. Then slowly she draws up her sleeve and shows where a deep-red mark discolours the whiteness of her snowy flesh.

'Did I do that?' says Hume, shocked at the sight. All his anger dies; he remembers nothing but that he has hurt her—*her*. Her poor pretty arm! Remorse comes upon him as he sees the injury he has inflicted on that lovely member. With a sudden unconquerable impulse he seizes her hand and presses a passionate kiss upon the crimson mark.

'Don't,' cries Nan pettishly, pushing him frowningly away. 'I would far rather have the bruise than the caress.'

She turns from him with determination, and walks swiftly in the direction that will take her to where the others are already weary of waiting for her.

'One moment,' says Hume. 'To-morrow?' anxiously. 'What about it—you—you will still come out sailing?'

'Oh, I don't know,' says Nan coldly. 'I really don't see how I can. There is very little pleasure to be obtained from anything, if one is to endure rudeness and ill-treatment with it.'

'You know I would rather die than ill-treat you,' says Hume.

'Well, I don't know what you call *this*,' pulling up

her sleeve once more, and looking at her arm. Perceiving that already the useful mark is rapidly disappearing, she covers it up again with all speed.

‘Try to forgive me that,’ pleads he, ‘and say you will keep to your promise to come out for a sail tomorrow.’

‘I don’t think I can, indeed,’ persists Miss Delaney, who wouldn’t have given up the sail for a good deal, yachting being her very chiefest joy. She shakes her head with terrible firmness, and walks on again with increasing haste.

‘Nan,’ says Hume desperately, ‘if I go down on my knees to you will you forgive me?’

‘I can’t imagine what good that could do,’ says Miss Delaney contemptuously. ‘A man on his knees must be a sorry spectacle. Do you propose to do it here, in this muddy spot? Well,’ brightening somewhat, as though the ‘sorry spectacle’ has suddenly presented itself in pleasant colours to her, ‘try it. One can never tell beforehand how one may be influenced by anything strange or out of the common.’

‘Here goes, then,’ says Hume, preparing to kneel on the grass that runs beside the path.

'Not there,' says she maliciously. 'I bargained for this identical spot,' pointing to where the late rain has made a little ugly pool upon the pathway.

'Oh, Nan, there is no one so strong as you. I pray you, then, show mercy,' says Hume, laughing in spite of himself. 'Let it, I implore you, be an inch or two to one side.'

Laughter is infectious, and so dear at all times to the heart of a Delaney that Nan, after a brief struggle, gives in to it.

'There, I'll let you off,' says she, with some scorn. 'Fancy being afraid of a little pool like that! Ah, there are the others, and everyone looking daggers. Well, I shall tell them, and truly, that it was all your fault.'

'And you will come to-morrow?' questions he eagerly.

'Yes; but, mind, I will have no scoldings, and no cross looks. The Leslies will surely be there?'

'They have promised faithfully.'

'Very good. If I choose to make myself agreeable to Jack Leslie, I won't be called to account for it.'

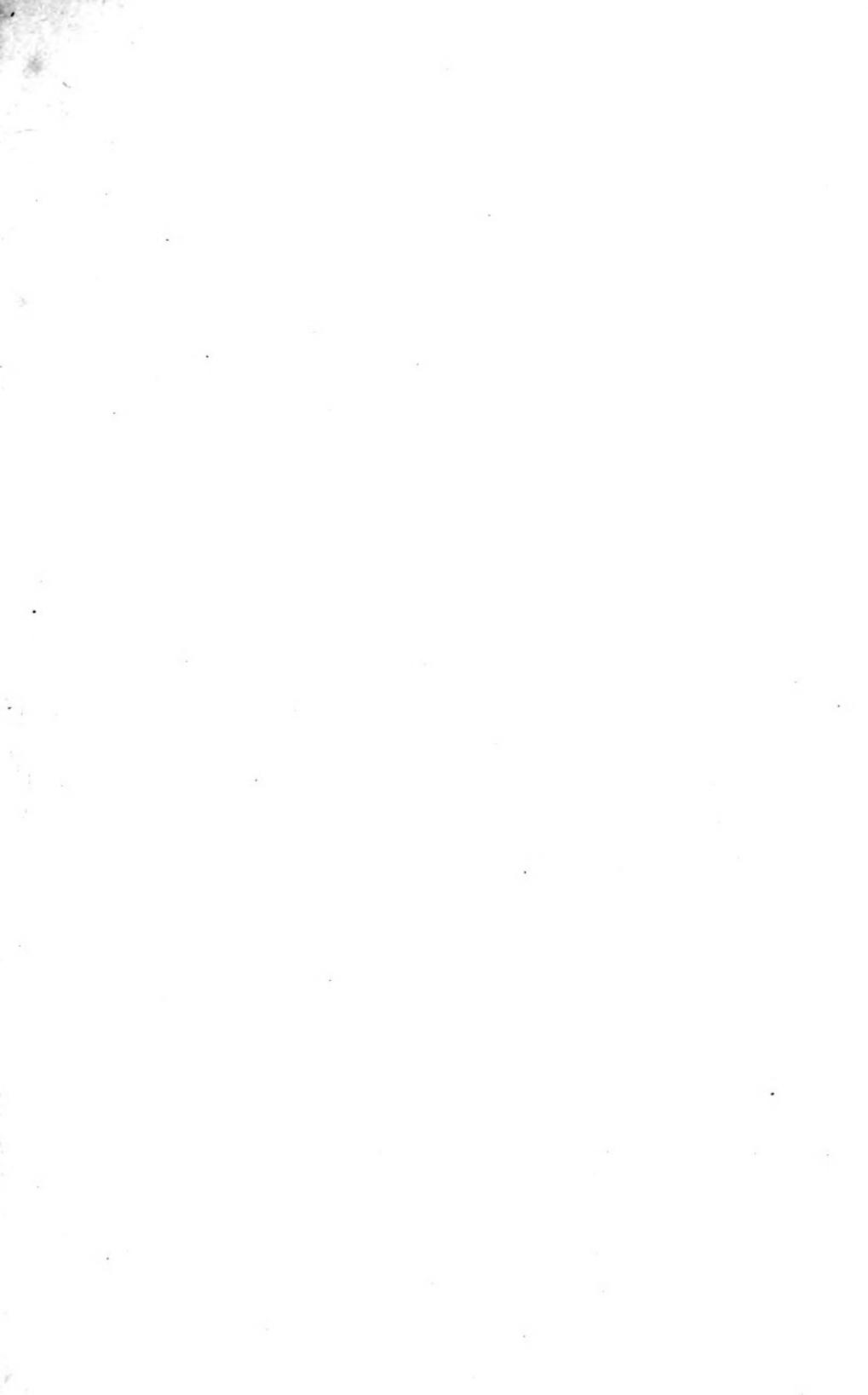
'Why, of course not,' says Hume. 'Who on earth would presume to call you to account for anything?'

'I should advise you to spend all your time between this and to-morrow trying to find that out,' says Miss Delaney, giving him a little sapient nod.

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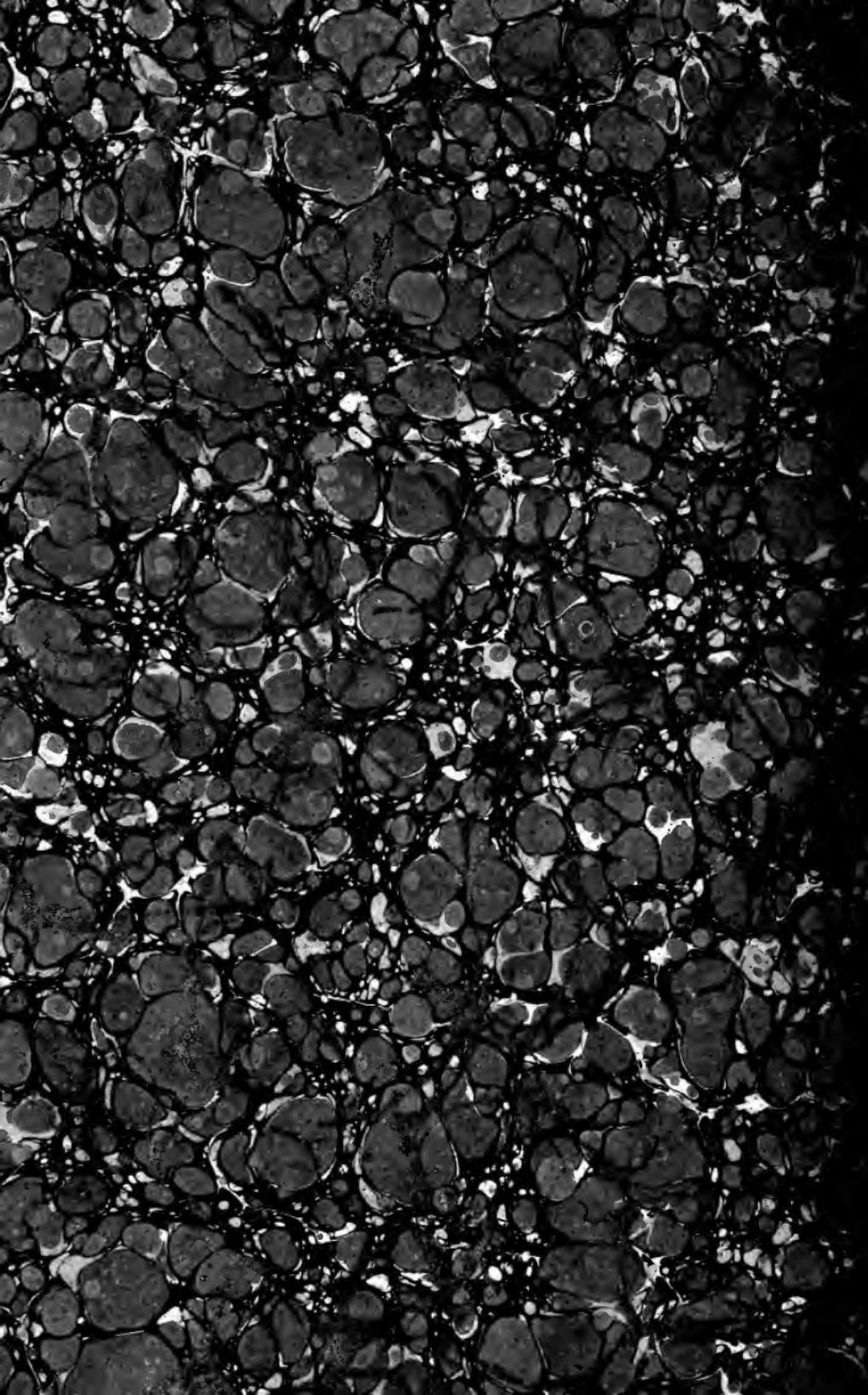


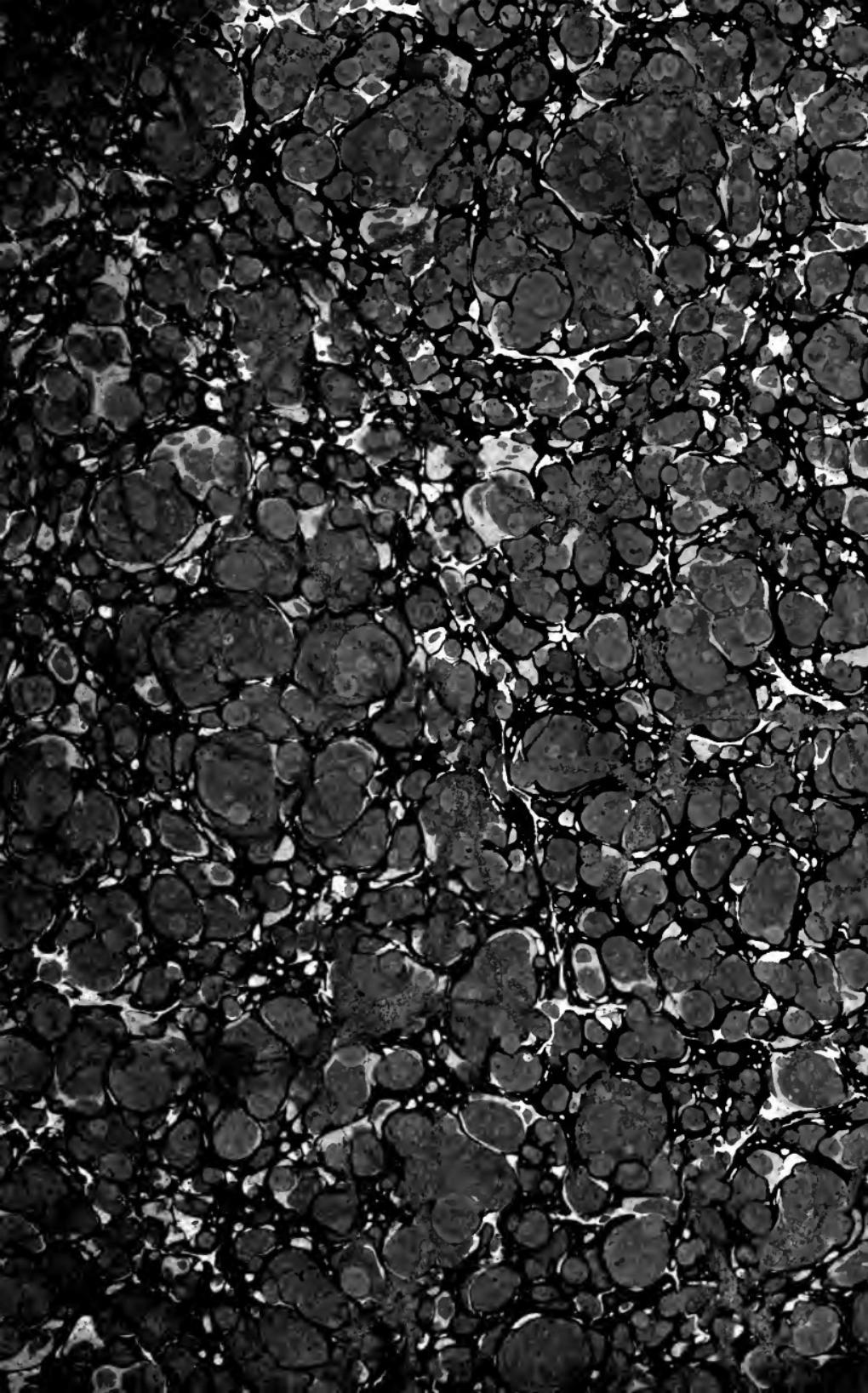












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